The Book of Love

Romans 5:1-5

St Francis 29th Nov 2015 10am

There’s a really great song by the Magnetic Fields called The Book of Love, sung by Peter Gabriel. The song’s opening line goes like this…

“THE BOOK OF LOVE IS LONG AND BORING…IT’S FULL OF CHARTS AND FACTS, SOME FIGURES AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR DANCING.”

I can see some of you rolling your eyes and thinking, “This is the most unromantic song EVER! Love is supposed to be poetry and intimacy!” But I (and Michelle will surely agree) will testify to the fact that the book of love is full of mundane things, like our love of crosswords and clean dishes from our dishwasher. The love of watching a movie with our kids. Ordinary, mundane things. The truest love exists in the spaces between weddings and anniversaries, and the rare times we go out for a meal on our own. In fact most of the work of love is pretty boring, inconvenient and sometimes downright stressful. Most of Christian ministry is mundane, boring, hard and occasionally exhilarating. It’s the truth!

The word “suffering” in our reading I think also can be translated in other ways- for example, pressure, tribulation, hardship or distress.  Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character and character hope.

A few weeks ago we as a family were due to go and visit my brother in NE London. We hadn’t seen each other for a while and we were all looking forward to meeting. But one of their family friends, a old lady call Evie, had a fall outside church, just before we arrived. So my brother took her to A & E and there she was given the choice of gp led service or full blown A & E. She chose GP, which she saw after several hours, only to be told you need an xray so you need to queue at the full A & E again for a further 4 hours. We never saw my brother that day. There’s nothing more boring than sitting in A & E. It never ends!

The book of love is long and boring.

Loving and caring for others is at times difficult, challenging, wearisome and draining.

Gary Haugen, founder of International Justice Mission quoted the “book of love” song in a talk I heard. IJM work to bring justice to oppressed people all over the world, using the local legal system. For example, there was a man, Ramon,  who was effectively enslaved at a rice factory in India. He worked 18 hours a day lifting 100lb sacks, stirring a scalding cauldron of rice, ruining his body, unable to leave because of debts to the owners. His parents had also been enslaved and he had worked since the age of 5 years old. Caught on camera, the owner laughed at the fate of the workers. The local police would do nothing. In most cases, this is what the bullies and tyrants know: The do-gooders show up late and leave early. All they do have to do is wait them out.

But something different happened in this case: IJM got involved and sent in lawyers and investigators who gathered evidence that the owner was grossly violating the law. The lawyers eventually took his case to court which was around an 8 hour round trip. On many occasion they would arrive at court only to be told there was more paperwork to fill out or that the case had been transferred without notice to another court, so they would go back empty handed. We imagine the work of an investigator to be exciting and dramatic and quick, as we see it on movies. Not so in this case.After 750 hours of lawyer time the Ramon was freed. After a total of 6000 hours of work and 50 court appearances, the owner was convicted and sent to prison.

The book of love is long and boring.

Maybe you are in a situation where God is calling you to simply love someone. Maybe it’s a child or a family member you long to come to faith. Maybe you care for a friend or a family member who has health problems. Maybe you are fighting for justice here or abroad.  Maybe you long to see God’s kingdom come in the lives of people on Monks Hill.

God says persevere. The book of love is long and boring.

How can we do it?

The passage is a clue. There are two reasons.

Firstly, the passage says we have been justified through faith. In other words Jesus has stood up in a heavenly law court and declared our innocence. Our sins are exposed and named in front of the whole court, but then Jesus has covered the penalty and so everything is put right in the eyes of God. True peace is restored and we have full access to the Father. We also know in due course that God will put right every wrong done against us. Therefore we can rejoice in the hope of a glorious future. But also we can rejoice in the middle of suffering, tribulation, pressures, hardships, inconvenience, and boredom.

Secondly, God has poured his love into our heart by his Holy Spirit.  Can we love someone through all the boring mundane tasks of that make up everyday life? Up to a point. But to go beyond that I sincerely believe we need something more.

And that is the supernatural love of God in our hearts, given by the Holy Spirit. How do people persevere bringing up a disabled child? How does a lawyer persist in going to court 50 times for one case? How does a neighbour take her elderly friend shopping every week for years and years? It is the love of God, poured into our hearts.

It’s often not exciting, dramatic or newsworthy. But it is necessary, and in the end it is what matters.

There is another line to the song I started with.

*The book of love is long and boring
No one can lift the darn thing
It's full of charts and facts, some figures and instructions for dancing

But I,
I love it when you read to me.
And you,
You can read me anything.*

However mundane it might be, we love it when someone reads the book of love to us. We love it when someone takes an interest, when someone fights our corner, when someone encourages us, or helps us. We love it when they read the book of love to us.

People ask me, why people don’t come to faith on Monks Hill. We’ve tried everything and it doesn’t work.

Have you tried the book of love?

I also get asked why doesn’t so and so change, or behave themselves? Their life would be so much easier if they did! The answer is the book of love.

Or why doesn’t justice happen in the world?

The book of love is long and boring.

But …. You can read it to me.

Amen.