

**Sermon 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (Sunday before Ascension- traditionally Rogation Sunday)  
25<sup>th</sup> May 2019 by Revd Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham**

*Readings: Ps 67; Acts 16: 9-15; John 14: 23 – 29*

When you get that message on your phone screen from Facebook or similar saying “we really care about you” what’s your most likely reaction? I know mine is probably “yeah right”. I don’t think I’m an unusually cynical person. It’s just that we live in a culture and society now which is deeply suspicious of slogans from organisations claiming to care; when we know their real aim is to make profits for their shareholders or cut costs without seeming to – which may or may not be a useful social function - but we can feel uncomfortable when the language of care and caring is hijacked to get us to read more advertisements, buy more products, make them more money.

There’s a pervading sense today that there’s an absence of care and caring in our way of life. “You don’t really care about us” is one of the most common accusations of a disgruntled public against politicians and organisations and one that still has real traction. Very few people are relaxed about being accused of lacking care especially if there’s evidence to show it’s true. Lack of care by public bodies whose purpose is to care is one of the recurring narratives of the news media. All the huge and tragic catastrophes of recent decades from the Kings Cross Underground Station fire to Hillsborough to Grenfell Tower are haunted by that accusation that some people with power or authority didn’t really care enough about the well-being and safety of others who relied on them to act with care. There’s lingering anxiety that we live in communities and a world where care is just not prevalent enough – care is absent. So no wonder singer Michael Jackson back in the 1990’s tapped into those fears with his earworm hit single “They don’t care about us”; and who knows what Melania Trump was doing when visiting a migrant children’s shelter wearing that jacket with the slogan on the back “I really don’t care – do u”? Just last week the United Kingdom was accused by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights of having become an uncaring society. Professor Phillip Alston reported that “The social safety net has been badly damaged by drastic cuts to local authorities’ budgets, which have eliminated many social services, reduced policing services, closed libraries in record numbers, shrunk community and youth centres and sold off public spaces and buildings. The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos.” The Government has reacted badly to this report notwithstanding that most of it simply describes what has been observed. Very few people are relaxed about an accusation of being uncaring.

Being caring matters and we are anxious that we have constructed a way of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which in the end squeezes caring out. Many people also have drifted away from faith in God; some we know because they cannot square faith in a loving God with what they see happens to many innocent victims of cruelty whether in personal relationships or armed conflicts. Questions trouble us. Is our society really about caring or is at root a dog eat dog situation? Are human beings really caring, or like William Golding’s famous novel *Lord of the Flies*, are we all under the surface only out for number one? Does God care – is there a caring God?

The power and good news of the Christian message is that in Jesus there appeared the embodiment of true caring in a human life; so true and pure it could only have been inspired by the Spirit of God. And when Jesus was destroyed by the uncaring machinations of the all too human, fearful leaders of his day, Christian faith proclaims him exalted and alive in God. It is this message of God’s unstoppable graciousness; to restore friendship and intimacy with humanity that is our good news. This faith counters our fears that in the end caring may be just an illusory phantasm and a mere cover for the sake of appearances.

Understandably those first disciples of Jesus, overjoyed as they were when he reappeared after his resurrection, were nonetheless concerned that when he finally left them bodily to return to the Father they would return to their old ways; the dream would be over, the world would reassert its

norms over them; the adventure of realising a new caring community where all are included and together in peace would fizzle away. The words of Jesus in the gospel of John urged his followers not to be afraid or let their hearts be troubled. His gift to them, and to us, is peace, his peace. And Jesus promised the gift of God's Spirit. The verses we read this morning contain one of five passages in the gospel where Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to the community of his followers. This reassured the disciples that God's love, the care which they saw embodied in Jesus, would not be absent when Jesus left them bodily, but would continue in the life of the community through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus described it as God being at home with them.

During this month our sermons have focussed on caring community. The church is affected of course by issues in wider society; after all we are very much part of it, even if there are aspects of our culture which we push against because of our faith. So we too have anxieties about whether we are truly caring. Because we know we are not always. Our Bishop, the Bishop of Oxford, Steven, is calling on all churches of our diocese to become more compassionate as one of the ways we may faithfully be more like Christ. If we are to be the embodiment today of Jesus, then our Bishop reminds us, we are to be communities of kindness, gentleness and love.

Our gospel reading today gives us the good news that becoming a truly caring community is not something we need to be anxious about. This is because it is the Spirit of God which lives in us as a community who will show us and remind us how to care. We need never worry that we cannot care or that the true spirit of caring is absent; even if we do in all our frailty mess up at times and hurt one another or forget to care or respect one another without really meaning to.

What does this mean in practice? Our Archdeacon, Olivia Graham, has written about this. Here is part of what she wrote:

“A compassionate Church is not a family – for one must be born into a family and an outsider will never really feel kin. It is a community of those who love, and who enfold the lonely, the sad, the grieving, the sick and the desperate in rich robes of warmth, understanding and acceptance. A compassionate Church speaks in voices which welcome the stranger, the outsider, the one who is different, and knows that its fellowship will be enriched when these become friends and diminished if they do not.”

Here at All Saints we can claim the confidence to become a more compassionate caring community. It is the Spirit of God who teaches us and shows us. God has given us the Spirit who is with us and within us. Our response is to be in prayer mode, in listening mode and in learning mode. Recently the Church of England nationally has been led to reflect more deeply on the importance of listening and caring when people have been abused. I've been talking and praying with our pastoral care team this week about how we as a local church can be appropriately supportive of one another when we have issues in our lives.

I'd like to remind you that we do have a dedicated pastoral care team comprising our clergy and our lay pastoral assistants and others offering pastoral support of various kinds. We are here to listen, to visit and to pray. We have those dedicated to the ministry of prayer and healing in church both at special services and after the 9.30am service every week. We have our bereavement care team offering friendly listening to those recently bereaved. Our home communion team visits people at home or sometimes in hospital again to listen, to pray and to bring the holy sacrament. Our baptism care team welcomes those who are having a young member of their family baptised. In all these ways we as a church community are offering listening and prayer support. In our church roles we are not set up to offer therapy or expert help, but we are trained and supported in caring and listening, by one another and by other trainers whom we bring in. In June for example our bereavement care group and others from the wider team will have an evening's training on listening. We can signpost to sources of help; and support one another within the church community through our friendship, companionship and prayer when we are in need or when we

are receiving medical or professional help. We respect one another when we want our needs to remain private to ourselves or our families. But never think that as a church community we are all too busy to offer care or support. And we do need to let someone at church know if we would like the support of our church.

As well as those members of our church who are offering their gifts and time in a dedicated organised way as member of pastoral care groups, we all can share God's care as a church community with one another and with those who come and join us week by week. The Spirit of God is with us and within us as a whole community not only in certain individuals or ministers.

Finally, this Sunday in the historic church year was known as Rogation Sunday – from the Latin verb “rogare” to ask – when prayers were said in the days leading up to Ascension Day to ask for God's blessing on the crops just planted and God's blessing on all our labours. In modern society we can extend those prayers to ask for God's blessing on all forms of productive and helpful work including caring for one another. By tradition, local churches on this day used to “beat the bounds of the parish” when a procession of parishioners, led by the minister and churchwardens would proceed around the boundary of their parish and pray for its protection in the forthcoming year. I mention this because it reminds us that being a caring church community is also about being part of God's care for the whole world, for our neighbours, for the community and the environment we live in together. This tradition now lives on in modern form in the days leading up to Pentecost as we take part in the global wave of prayer known as “Thy Kingdom Come” initiated by our own Archbishops of Canterbury and York. The first weekend ie next Saturday and Sunday we are welcoming our guest speaker Archbishop Winston who will talk about climate change and the work of the church mission agency USPG in regard to that globally; and the second weekend on the Saturday before Pentecost Sunday we will not be exactly beating the bounds of the whole parish but we will be having a prayer walk through the parish visiting some of the new areas of housing. In these ways and as we do in prayer every day at morning and evening prayer we can express our care for the wider community.

On Thursday this week at our Ascension Day service we'll celebrate that, whilst Jesus went from human sight in bodily form; he was lifted up to be with us always and everywhere in the Spirit. The Spirit of God who is love, is with us now and as Jesus promised teaches us and reminds us of all the care that Christ embodied and showed us; inspiring us and enabling us to embody God's care today in this community.

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