Sermon preached in Saint Andrew's St Andrews
on Sunday 10th September 2017

(Year A, Pentecost 14)

Romans 13.8-14

In the world in which we live my guess is that it's pretty much impossible to live life without at some point, and more likely at many points, of incurring some sort of debt. If we're talking about financial debt, then the opportunities to incur it are more or less endless. We live in a so-called 'credit economy' – urged at every point to 'buy now, and pay later', the allure of the credit card with an ever increasing credit limit, or the low interest loan enabling us to get what we want, and to get it now. Whether we need it, or can really afford it or not.

I have admitted before from this pulpit my own capacity for seduction by various forms of consumer item – the iPhone 7 is a current hot contender, closely followed by a particularly beautiful electric guitar which is not quite the same as any of the nine or ten guitars I already own. And all it takes for either of these (or any one of numerous other potential items clamouring to gratify my insatiable desire to have more stuff, or better stuff, is the gentle downward pressure of my finger on the computer keyboard as, probably late in the evening, it hovers tentatively over the 'Buy now!' button on Amazon.co.uk or the Apple Store, or whatever virtual emporium I have been browsing for the sake of titillation; and before you know it, whatever it is is packaged and posted and winging its way towards the Rectory for next day delivery, hopefully when I'm the only person in, so that I can smuggle it in unseen. The next moment of excitement comes, of course, with that feeling of vertigo attendant upon opening the envelope in which the credit card bill is contained.

But it's not just expensive indulgences and the myriad things that we could easily *do without* (and which come in any case with a built in obsolescence that means we have to upgrade or replace them with a new one with the bill for the old one still only partly paid) that fuels the 'debt economy' – for that, of course, is what the credit economy is, once stripped of its more palatable title. Increasingly in the modern western world it is becoming normal for the encouragement to 'buy now, pay (and incidentally pay *considerably* more!) later' to present itself as pretty much the only option with regard to much more basic and necessary acquisitions – a place to live, a means of transport, and, alas, an education. So, most of us know something about what it means to be in debt, to owe something to someone and to be expected to pay it back, quite likely with a rate of interest added. For better or for worse, it's the way our world works.

To some extent it has always been thus. Otherwise Shakespeare could not have written The Merchant of Venice, and Jesus could not have told his parable about the Unforgiving Servant (you remember – the one where the servant has his own quite significant debts mercifully cancelled by his master, but who then promptly

goes out and demands payment of a relatively trivial amount from a fellow-slave, and, when the man cannot pay, has him cast into prison). But even as it grapples with the economic realities of human life, Scripture envisages something really quite radical – a world in which there is no indebtedness, where goods and services are exchanged as *gift*, where one person gives out of the plenitude of his or her wealth – of money, of skill and experience, of food, whatever it might be – to meet the needs of those in the community who have need, and in turn receives as *gift* from their skill or wisdom or material wealth that in which he or she is lacking. That's the point of that most radical of Jewish festivals the Jubilee, where, once every fifty years all debts in the nation were to be cancelled, preventing the crushing social and personal consequences of some becoming ever more indebted, and others ever more wealthy on the back of it. 'Our Father in heaven', Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, 'cancel our debts, as we cancel the debts of any who owe us anything'. It's a metaphor, of course, but it's rooted in the rich social and economic vision which Scripture holds out of a wholly different way of modeling human community in a world which we receive freely as a gift from the hand of God, and in which giving and sharing out of the fullness of what we have received is a far more natural impulse than locking things within institutions of borrowing and lending, and the squeezing of personal gain out of each such transaction.

Paul, I'm sure, had all this at least in the back of his mind if not on the tip of his tongue when he reached for an image to say something equally radical and potentially transformative of human living in our epistle this morning. 'Owe no one anything', he says, 'except to love one another'. 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another, because in loving others you fulfill the law'.

Paul was writing to Christians, of course, and so this was first and foremost an injunction about the way a *Christian congregation* should live and be seen to live. And later in the passage we read together he uses a different image which speaks in part of the same thing: 'put on Christ', he says, as if Christ himself, Christ's character, Christ's relationship with his heavenly Father were a mantle in which to wrap ourselves, a way of being human before God which is true to Jesus' own way of being human before God. Christ, in whom love for God and love for us took concrete and costly form, being fused together in the supreme act of self-offering to God and for our sake – the way of his suffering, death, and resurrection. Clothe yourself with the humanity of Jesus, Paul is saying, the sort of humanity that loves God so much that it shares his love for all that he has made, and pays the price of that love all the way to the end.

But Paul isn't just thinking of Christians, of course. This radical new idea, that the only thing we should ever owe anyone (or suppose them to owe us) is *love*, is not just a way of being *Christian*, he supposes, but is what it means to be *truly human*, *fully* human, the sort of human being in relation to God and to one another and to the world in which we live that God envisaged and purposed in creating us in the first place, after which, the Old Testament tells us, he stopped, and stood back, and enjoyed what he had made, and declared it 'good'. So, Paul appeals to the Old Testament too, those same Hebrew Scriptures which formed the social and religious backdrop to the gospel, without which it would be impossible to make

any good sense of them; and, he says, this same basic idea is there too: because love, he tells his readers, is the fulfillment of *the law* – all those challenging 'thou shalt nots' which Moses brought down from his hillwalking expedition on the Sinai peninsula, were not, he suggests, a randomly generated set of religious and moral edicts, but *the etching into stone of God's own name and character* as it might look if translated into flesh and blood: What they capture, and what the gradual unfolding of them in word and deed begins to flesh out in detail, is what it would be like if God himself were to be translated into human form – how would God live, how would God relate to others? *Keeping the law*, in other words, is no mere conformity to a set of unduly demanding moral and spiritual rules. It is about a way of living together that conforms to who God himself *is*, that *reflects* who he is, that *bodies forth* his very image in the world. It's about being the sorts of creatures that we were made and called and always intended to be. The sorts of creatures whose very way of being and living proclaims the truth about the one who made them: that he is, from first to last, in his dealings with others, love, love that never does anyone wrong.

And of course we struggle to do it. Of course we do. In fact, there has only ever been one human life in which that same truth has been made fully present in flesh and blood; only one human life in which the ancient law of Sinai has been properly fulfilled. And that was the one in whom God himself took our creaturely nature upon himself, and dwelt among us as one of us, uniting us to himself by our shared flesh and blood, and renewing our humanity so that what he did for us – paying our debt, loving God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength – might now be something he gradually works out in us, as our love for God plays itself out in our lives in radical, costly love for others.

Love one another, says Paul, *really* love one another, and in doing so you fulfill the law. That's what you owe (that's your obligation) to them, and to God. Because that's what it means to be human in the way that Jesus was human. *Love* one another. It's not an injunction to feel a certain way, but to act in a certain way, regardless of what we may be feeling. In fact, in any human community, and certainly in the church, there are going to be people so different from us in outlook and understanding and preference and priorities and ways of doing things that we couldn't summon up much positive feeling toward them if we tried. That's okay. We're not called to massage or manipulate our feelings. We're called to a form of action, a way of behaving towards them which does them no wrong, actively seeks their good as those who are loved by the same heavenly Father who loves us, and is prepared itself to bear the cost of that good being realized. A way of behaving towards them which does them no wrong, actively seeks their good, and is prepared to bear the cost itself of that good being realized.

What might it mean for us to begin deliberately to put that into practice on a daily basis? What might it mean for our congregation (or any other, but…) to become ever less a comfy club for the like-minded, and ever more completely and fully and radically a community which radiates the sort of love that meets difference not by seeking to exclude it, or to change it, but by actively opening itself to it, to embrace it, and to offer it a place at the table which properly

speaking is not *ours* to offer, but the Father's table, the table which heralds his coming kingdom, the table to which *we* come asking only that he weigh not our merits (for they are pitiful), but pardon our offences, and cancel our debts.

It seems to me that in a world ever more fully and completely divided in one way or another, in which difference is often dealt with either by pushing it to the margins or else by allowing it free play of a sort which leads so easily to suspicion, fear, and violence between different groups or those possessed of different 'identities', the Christian church may have something profound and, ironically, something distinctive to bear witness to: namely, a way of being in which difference is not simply erased by a form of ideological or theological self-selection, nor merely 'tolerated' in a grudging manner, and as long as it doesn't do any harm, but actually embraced for its own sake as part of the world called into being and sustained in being by God's love, the good of each being actively sought by the other, and the loving co-existence of all being something to which all are committed, whatever their differences, and for which they are willing to bear whatever the cost might be.

If the church is to serve the world in the coming decades, let alone flourish and grow; if the world as we know it is to survive and human communities flourish rather than disintegrating and fragmenting, these are things we are going to have to get to grips with and to grapple with. After all, we owe it, to ourselves, and to one another.