

**29<sup>th</sup> June, 2014.**

**Reading: Matthew 5: 38 - 48**

**Sermon: What sort of witness do we provide?**

I met with a gentleman from the Gideons on Thursday morning. He was meeting with other ministers in the area and had asked if he could come along and see me as well. He wanted to share with me something of the outreach work which is being carried out by the Gideons.

He was also looking for nominees who could be considered to work with them although I suspect there is a fairly strict vetting process. However, before you all your rush at the end of the service to tell me you want your name to be put forward, I have to warn you that most of us cannot be nominated.

When I read the form for nominations it said: **Name** and beside it **Wife's Name**. You can apply as a husband and wife team or as a single man but not as a single woman. In some ways, it's got a lot to be said for it because it means that the men need to take responsibility for this area of work and can't leave it to the women. Others, however, may be offended by the form but it's the way it is. It's a Christian organisation run by business men and they are to be commended for the work that they do and for the finance they provide so that Bibles can be provided in a variety of locations in many different countries.

However, what struck me about the man was his faith and his belief that God, in answer to prayer, would lead him, and others who work with him, that God would lead them to people who needed to experience God's love, that God would lead them to people who needed to talk or who needed a Bible.

He was able to give examples of people who had come to faith through the work of that organisation. One he mentioned is now a minister. Some he mentioned had come across a Bible in an hotel room. Others had come to faith through reading the New Testament they were given in school – some many years after they had been given it and others had come to faith at various events such as the Olympic Games. The Gideons, along with many other Christians, will also have a presence at the Commonwealth Games and many thousands of Bibles will be given out. Who knows what the result of that will be and how many lives will be changed because people will have hope.

Each of us who believes is called to share our faith with others and we all do that in different ways. We are also called to live out our faith, to express our faith and the love of God in our actions.

That's not always something we are very good at doing. If we take our faith seriously, I challenge us in the next week to notice how we react in every situation in which we find ourselves. It may be somebody in the house who says something which annoys us. How do we react? It may be someone in a

shop or at work who says something or does something which doesn't please us, or equally, someone who doesn't do something which we expect them to do, how do we react? It may be someone in Church. How do we react?

The challenge is not to look at the situation and it is certainly not to judge the other person. It is simply to look at our own reaction and to reflect on what we say or do or think. How does it fit with our Christian faith? Do we reflect love, compassion and forgiveness or do we reflect anger, blame and condemnation?

Having looked at our reaction, let us ask ourselves what kind of witness our reaction provides to those around us. Do those around us see anything of the love of God reflected in our lives? Do those around us, wherever we are, see any evidence of our faith in action?

We have a responsibility as Christians to nurture faith in others, not to drive them away. As is almost always said at baptisms: **It is better to have a millstone fastened round your neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea than to cause one of those little ones who believes in me to stumble.** Jesus' words. To God we are all His children. We are all his little ones and so we have a responsibility to each other. We are here to serve each other, to nurture each other, to build one another up. It is not a one way thing. We are not here simply to receive, simply to take.

However, there will always be those who will simply take. When we consider our Scripture reading for today, we see there that there is more asked of us than we might expect. **If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.** We might think we are doing really well if we just give what is asked of us but Jesus says: Don't stop there. Give more. Give willingly to those who would take from you.

The people who allegedly broke into our hall appear in court tomorrow charged with stealing from us. Should we be pursuing them or should we be reaching out to them in love? Should we be demonstrating to them that we don't practice an eye for an eye but rather forgive and put the past behind us?

In our Scripture reading Jesus also says: **If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.**

Go the extra mile – not as a sign of martyrdom but out of love. Go the extra mile. Do more than is asked or expected of you because you care and not because you are looking for anything in return.

That is quite a challenge for all of us especially at this time of year when we have been working all winter and are tired but let's not forget that Jesus didn't say: Keep going till you drop. He said: **Love your neighbour as you love yourself.** In loving ourselves, we have to care for ourselves. That might mean

taking time off so that we get a break and an opportunity to recharge our batteries.

Jesus got into a boat with his disciples and took himself off to the other side of the lake in the hope of getting some rest. The crowd followed him but the point is made that even he needed a break.

Serving God is not about running ourselves into the ground. It is about showing compassion and love to those around us even if we are tired. That costs us nothing. That is about our reactions and not necessarily about our actions. We don't need to be running around like headless chickens to serve our God but we do need to show compassion and love to everyone we meet. It's not an easy challenge but challenges never are. It's not easy but it is what we are called to do on a daily basis as we serve our God.