

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse - Sunday March 16th 2008
John 15:9-17

Ian began by telling the story of when he was a schoolteacher and how the founder of the school CU Camp was someone whom the students use to make fun of because he had a funny way of humming to himself around the school. And yet through those camps literally hundreds of young people came to faith over the 30 years of those camps. He was fruitful. But he wasn't striving to bear fruit, not in an aggressive sense. He did want the young people to come to faith, but not in a manipulative way. What he was doing most of the time was simply following Jesus, praying, humming (!), loving.

Through the simple act of abiding in Jesus, remaining in his love, he bore fruit, lasting fruit.

The evangelistic fruitfulness of our lives is not something separate from our devotional lives. The one flows from the other. The fruitfulness depends on our simply abiding.

This could seem a bit mystical, and not very concrete, or social. In v.9 Jesus commands us to abide in His love. How do we do that? By obeying His commands. If He expects us to obey the 613 commands in the Old Testament alone, that sounds like a real burden. Jesus reduces it to one: Love one another. If you love one another you will be abiding on God's love. If you love the people of God in the body of believers, then you are abiding in the love of God. We will be abiding in Jesus not only when we pray for someone, but when we talk to someone in the coffee lounge who is on their own after the service; not only when we say grace before a meal, but in the conversation around a meal table. The whole atmosphere of the Christian life, the whole way in which we live our lives personally and corporately is the biggest evangelistic strategy we have. It's our foreign policy. It's irrelevant whether we have the right programmes or the right worship, we just have to love one another.

What makes the difference is love, our love for God, and through that our love for one another. That's what the world is looking for in an increasingly impersonal, statistical, 'I-it' world. This is the only thing we have - Jesus God's Son, and a community of friends. This might not sound very strategic.

It is friendship of a certain kind. It's not the 'I'll be there for you' for a group of touch-feely 30-somethings (the TV series 'Friends'). Jesus didn't come to die simply 'to be there for us', but to 'die for us', to do something that only he could do: bear the sins of the world. His is utter love, and through this death we get the mercy of God.

Jesus chooses us, and He chooses all sorts to be our friends, the people we have to live with. In Ian's last Church they re-arranged the small groups so that they were called friendship groups and a cross section of people were selected to form the groups. People objected because they couldn't choose their friends. Because choice is now seen as a basic right. However our great call is to love the people around us, even the ones not from our background. We need to renounce the God of choice and love the people Jesus calls His friends. Through a civilisation of love, a circle of love: the Father's love for you → love one another → throw back to the love of God.

We need not worry about offending the world with our dogma, our morality or our worship. However we must worry when the world does not see love in the Church.