

Today is Rally Sunday, an important day in the church's year, a day when the whole program year starts again and we think that we get going, it's great to have the choir back and we look forward to the year ahead. It's not something that we do in England, so I still feel rather ill-prepared for what to do and say on Rally Sunday. So as is our custom these days, I Googled an answer, what would be a suitable message for Rally Sunday? So, I typed in rally cry. I thought, well, maybe I'll find something that will be something that can excite us and take us into this year.

I found out that in Japan, the samurai were led into battle by a warlord who would issue the rallying cry, e-i, e-i, and the people in the army would all respond, oh! And I thought, I can't say that because we'll all be saying Old McDonald had a farm. My estimation of the samurai as a fighting force went down with the image in my mind of them going into battle singing a nursery song. So, I did what I probably should have done in the first place and looked at the scriptures for inspiration there. And I did, thankfully, find two things, two imperatives, which I think we can rally behind this year. The first is in the epistle set for today. St. Paul says this, "Owe no one anything except to love one another."

Love one another, there's something that we can all rally behind. It's a rallying cry that features throughout scripture. "Love is the fulfilling of the law," Paul writes. Jesus said, "Loving your neighbor is the greatest commandment." And in His last words to His disciples, He said, "I'll give you a new command. Love one another as I have loved you. So must you love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples because of your love for one another." We are not to be known by our rightness; we are to be known by our love.

The church Father Jerome describes how John the Evangelist carried on preaching in Ephesus, well into his nineties, well past the age when he was fit and well. So, he had to be carried into the church on a stretcher. And when he could no longer preach a normal sermon, he'd lean up on his stretcher on one elbow and he'd say this, "Little children, love one another." And then he'd be carried out back on his stretcher. Well, this went on for weeks till some of the people in the congregation complained and said,

"Why always the one sentence sermon, 'Little children, love one another.' Why do you always say this?" "Because." St. John replied, "it is the Lord's command, and if only this is done, it is enough."

And our gospel reading reminds us that the love we are called to practice is not a gooey or sentimental kind of love. Jesus talks in that passage about what two people should do if they fall out, if they have a disagreement. And what He's offering here is an example of love in action. And it's very counter-cultural. It's so easy not to address broken relationships and breakdowns, just to sit and stew. And we now have that phrase, cancel culture, which legitimizes that kind of behavior of just ignoring someone, putting them to one side. Seems to be acceptable if we cancel them or if we ignore them.

When I was at school, we used to have the phrase, if someone upset you, you used to say, "I'm sending them to Coventry", which is a very bleak town in the middle of England. And that would mean you wouldn't talk to them. I don't know if there's an equivalent over here, maybe do you send people to Bakersfield? I don't know. But I'm sure there's some equivalent. Now, whether we cancel someone or send them to Coventry or send them to Bakersfield, it's not the right way to deal with conflict. We are to go to the person who's sinned against us, Jesus says, and point out the fault. We are to have and risk honest conversations. We should strive for genuine healing and not be content with the illusion of harmony. We're to pursue deep relationships.

There's a temptation when we read this passage, and this happened in the staff meeting when we were talking about it on Tuesday, that we all naturally put ourselves in the position of the one who's been wronged. And we read this passage as a way of what to do with someone who's upset us or said something that they shouldn't have done, who's sinned against me. But we could think about turning it around. We could ask ourselves, am I willing to hear hard truths from people that I've offended, when I've been the one to say something out of line or to say something hurtful? Do I value authenticity enough that I can be the one to listen without defensiveness when someone confronts me about something? And what's clear in the gospel reading is that Jesus attaches huge

importance to relationships and also to the church as a whole.

Elsewhere in the New Testaments, St. Paul describes the church as Christ's body. When conflicts arise in the church, there's more at stake than personal feelings. What's at stake is the health and wellbeing of the body of Christ. Here at St. James, we are not like the Rotary, we're not like a garden club. We're not even like a music society. We are the body of Christ. What's different about us? What sets us apart is clear in the final sentence of our gospel reading. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." That's an incredible thought. That's what sets us apart from other organizations, that we are a body where Jesus, by His spirit, dwells with us and amongst us.

And this leads to the second imperative I want us to rally around which comes in the Psalm that Carsten read for us this morning. "Let the praises of God be in their throat," the Psalmist says. We are a people who love. We are a people who praise. And as we celebrate our new organ, and over these next few weeks and months, there'll be a lot of celebrating going on, I want us to be inspired to be a people of praise. We've got the new organ primarily to lead us in praise and worship of God, our Savior. We have so much to thank and praise God for, not least that God is amongst us by His spirit. "Hallelujah," the psalm begins, "sing to the Lord a new song. Sing His praises in the congregation of the faithful." That's a rallying cry for us. Hallelujah.

John Wesley was an Anglican priest from a couple of hundred years ago. He didn't quite found Methodism, but the Methodists like to think he founded Methodism, but that's a different story. But he's a bit of a hero of mine. If you come into my study, you'll see that there's a picture of him on my wall. And he went to Oxford University, and he had a lot going, for he was from a Christian home, a well-established family. He was very bright. Sadly, he had a tendency in his early years to be rather snobbish and sarcastic, which explains when he met a porter in his early days at Oxford, it soon turned out when he got into conversation with this porter, that the porter was so poor he didn't even have a bed to sleep on, which was something of a startling revelation to the well-heeled Wesley. And so, he asked the porter rather

sarcastically, "So what else do you praise God for?" And the porter smiled, and in a spirit of meekness, replied in joy, "I thank him that he has given me my life and being, a heart to love, and above all, a constant desire to serve Him." And Wesley was cut to the quick and deeply moved. And he recognized there that there was something in this man that he needed to learn, to be thankful and to praise God in all circumstances. And he learned that lesson because when he was on his deathbed aged 88 and his family and friends gathered round the very enfeebled Wesley, he aroused the energy to say to those gathered there, with his closing breath, he led them in the singing of, "I'll Praise my Maker While I have Breath".

Let the praises of God be in our throats. Love and praise, two great words to carry us into the year ahead. Hallelujah!

Amen.