“You have become very dear to us.”

Our readings today are about relationship. It is the last Sunday of Trinity, next week we begin to move towards Advent, on this boundary Sunday we pause to mark the gift of Holy Scripture. For this Sunday is often known as Bible Sunday, and the weeks between here and Advent are known as the Kingdom season.

The Bible may be likened to someone looking at the landscape. Your eyes may see the hills, the grass, hedges, and fields. Our landscape is very beautiful.

Your eyes may see deeper. You may perceive the millennia of history which has shaped the land. The movement of the earth’s surface, places where rocks are broken and forced to the surface, strata from different ages resting side by side. You may notice the gentle but persistent erosion by water so that a mere stream shapes an entire valley. You may hold the soil in your hand and know that this was once the bed of a deep ocean.

Or your eyes may look again, and see the labour of humanity which has shaped the land. The pattern of fields, the hands that have laid hedges, the years of graft and sweat, the hopes and tears of those who work this God given land.

The Bible is like such a landscape. A quick glance isn’t enough. There is depth here. There are stories. There is history. The modern man in his motor car thinks he knows all, but a quick glance at the land as you zoom by tells you nothing. You need to stop, and look, and look again. You need to hold this earth to know its story.

Our readings are about relationship. Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians is one of the earliest, he opens it simply by stating his name, he doesn’t describe himself as an apostle. The only way he reveals what is means to be an apostle is in relationship with others.

He uses three images. Firstly he says, to speak for God demands courage. He writes of the opposition and maltreatment he and others had endured. The person who speaks for God is often met with opposition. Their words will not be popular. The gospel can cause offence when it is proclaimed.

I suspect the Archbishops know how that feels this week, I know David Sheppard faced that hostility many times, you and I know from our own experiences that sometimes saying the right thing means speaking a truth that is unpopular.

Relationships aren’t always easy.

The second mark of the apostle is integrity. This builds on those times when what is said may not please those to whom it is addressed. But we are here to please God, not others.

Anyone skilled in sales will know that people can be persuaded by smooth words and enticing offers. The Christian message has neither. We deal in truth and hope and love. Often the right words are uncomfortable words. This is the legacy of the prophets. People can only change from within when they sense the deep integrity of the message.

As John said last week, this is not about what we do and say, this is about who we are.

The third aspect of apostleship is relationship with people. Paul tells the Thessalonians, “You have become very dear to us.” The mark of a parish church is that it cares for the people and gives, not only the services and acts of the church, but as Paul says, not only the gospel of God but also our own selves.

There is a price to be paid for relationship.

Paul says – we were gentle among you. There is some discussion how that is best translated. Some versions say – we were are infants among you, pointing to vulnerability of the apostle. But the word ‘gentle’ reminds me of how it is used by the Psalmist, that ‘gentle’ can be read as ‘loving correction’.

Sometimes to turn someone’s life from despair to hope, from destruction to redemption, needs some tough love. The parent who corrects a child may incur tears and temper, but if consistent, and done with integrity and consistency, a child may learn wisdom and grace.

So, relationship is at the heart of what God seeks and what God gives.

And when the Pharisee asks – which is the greatest commandment, Jesus replies with what God seeks and what God gives. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

The strength bit isn’t what is sounds like. There’s no advantage to being built like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Dwayne Johnson, it’s not about pumping iron. Strength means substance – you shall love the Lord your God with all that you are and with all that you have. In exactly the same way bride and groom pledge themselves to one another;

With my body I honour you,  
all that I am I give to you,  
and all that I have I share with you,

within the love of God.

This is a re-creating relationship. It changes the landscape, sometimes by earth shattering upheaval, more often by quiet persistent gentleness. This landscape is shaped by human graft, by hard work inspired by hope and often tempered with tears, we build this new kingdom one tiny grain at a time.

Which is why the second greatest commandment is to reveal this different way of life in our relationship with others. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. It is not rocket science, it is infinitely more powerful and world shaping.

This new landscape has depth, and stories, and history. It is not taken in at a glance. You need to hold this earth in your hands, and know its cost.

Holy God, we give you thanks and praise for all who have had the courage to speak out boldly for the gospel,

for the saints and martyrs of the past,

for holy men and women who now stand for justice and freedom.

May our lives join theirs in serving you,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.