Lord, may I speak the words you want me to speak, may we hear the words that you want us to hear. ***Amen***

"Let love be genuine" says St Paul.
What *does* he mean? What is *genuine love*?

- Does he mean that exciting, champagne-in the-blood feeling of falling in love?
- Does he mean that overwhelming adoration you feel when you hold a baby and smell their head?
- Does he mean that heart bursting pride at the success of a close friend or family member?

My friends*, I do not think* any of these things are what St Paul means by genuine love.
Genuine love is how we act to people we don't know or know and don't like. It is how we act:

- To people we don't agree with,
- To people we think are wrong,
- to people who have been unkind to us.

This is what St Paul means when he tells the church in Rome that their love should be genuine, that they should love one another with mutual affection.
"But I can't help how I feel," we say.

- That person *really annoys* me,
- *that other person* says unkind things about me or, worse still, to someone I love
- a third person asks me for help or money, but *if only* they we more sensible and did not waste their money on foolishness, they wouldn't even need to ask.

Yet these are the people God has given us to love. And you already know who these people are in your own life. You already know who God is asking you to love, even though it feels difficult or impossible.

Because it's *not about* how you feel. It's about what *you choose to do with those feelings.*
This is what St Paul means by "genuine love". How should *you act? St Paul says:*

- Practice hospitality to strangers – in church, in town, in the country at large. Open your hearts, open your minds, open your pockets to visitors, travellers, foreigners!
- Bless those who persecute you and do not curse them. Return a kind word for an unkind word, a loving thought for a hateful glance. Do not return evil for evil.

This is what genuine love is. It's the self-discipline of making the loving choice about how to act. It's not about how you *feel*, it's about what you say and do.

Aha, you say, but isn't it a sort of hypocrisy, fake love, as it were, to just act and not feel it? Isn't that a sort of pretending, the very opposite of genuine love?

Think of the parents who get up at night to a crying baby, however much they'd rather stay in bed: they choose to act lovingly. Is that fake love? We all know that it is genuine love, just as we all can imagine people who extravagantly proclaim their love but never do anything to help. They may have the loving feelings: but they are choosing not to act!

Last week, the Archdeacon referred to the previous verses in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, where he writes "I appeal to you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice" – suggesting that Paul wanted the believers to see themselves not just as passive receivers of God's grace and His gifts, but (and I wrote these words down at the time) – we should think of ourselves as *active choosers.*

There is a long history of thinking of faith as something *we choose*. Part of that tradition is reflected in a hymn from the early 20th Century church in India that goes: “I have decided to follow Jesus: no turning back, no turning back”

And that’s us, the church today, the people who have decided, who have made a choice, to follow Jesus. We tend to think that the *important* choices we make are the *big ones*, the ones we make once and for all: where to live, what work to do: whether to marry and who, and in certain Christian circles, “the decision for Christ”.

These are the sorts of choices that are illustrated in one of my favourite books to read with children. “You choose”
If you could go anywhere, where would you go?
What kind of home would you choose?
Would you travel with wheels or wings? Or perhaps choose one of these other things?
On second thoughts, perhaps some of the choices in this book are not quite one offs. Maybe you *can* choose to travel by bus on Monday and car on Tuesday.
And maybe following Jesus isn’t a one-off decision either, as the Indian hymn suggested, but a *re-deciding* every day, every hour, every minute. Because every minute brings us another choice about what to do or how to act: every minute beings us another opportunity to choose the loving response, a long series of small choices that add up to the bigger choice, as we try to follow Jesus in every minute and in everything. Because we all know how hard it is to practice these non-dramatic, persistent virtues. Those daily acts of kindness, patience, generosity that Paul urges on the believers in Rome.

And yet, perhaps these are the very choices that mean we are setting our mind on divine things, as Jesus urged Peter to do. To choose to ignore our feelings, as the world says we should do, but instead, to act on what we believe to be right. The second verse of the hymn “I have decided to follow Jesus” goes: the world behind me, the cross before me, the world behind me, the cross before me, no turning back, no turning back.

Maybe these are the crosses that Jesus asks us to take up: *to choose* to smile at the interrupting stranger, *to give* the cost of a cup of coffee to the street beggar, *to fake it until we can make it*.

To follow Jesus is to follow his example, and choose, as he chose, to put others before ourselves. Surely that *is* genuine love. Or as the old Christian Union mnemonic had “God first, others next, self last”.

I’ve three more thoughts about choosing.
We’ve been talking a bit about healthy diets at home. And one of the ideas that we have been coming back to is that some foods, while not bad in themselves, occupy space on the plate that would be better occupied by other foods. More vegetables and less cheese, as it were. More salad and less steak. And that if we choose to focus on increasing the salad and the veg, the others will automatically decrease. (Please do not take diet advice from me but consult your own doctor.) However, I do think there may be a helpful metaphor there, about what we choose to fill the plate of our life with: and how if we make those choices well, we may find that there is less space for other, less desirable choices.

The second thought I have had about consciously choosing kindness, the loving act, is that it will, eventually, become a habit. And like most habits, it gets easier with practice, until it becomes almost automatic. And this is maybe what the Saints and mystics have to teach us, that if we act *as if* we are good, we will eventually *become* good. That if we act *as if* our love is genuine, then it will *become genuine*.

And my last thought about choosing love is about the message of hope that it proclaims.

There was an interesting article in the Guardian a couple of weeks ago. A radio broadcaster had mocked people in poverty for making bad decisions about their own health, claiming that a toothbrush, or healthy food, or going for a run cost little or nothing, and that society was having to pick up the bill for some people's poor choices.

The Guardian columnist pointed out that poverty creates urgent problems (bills, school shoes, dinner tonight), and that the stress of poverty focuses the mind on the here and the now. A toothbrush, an exercise programme, is an investment in the future, which is always tomorrow, and never urgent. For some people, to buy a toothbrush would be an act of hope, that what they do today can bring a better tomorrow. In the same way, how we to choose to act today can be a sign of hope to the world. As St Paul says, at the end of today's Epistle, *we choose* to overcome evil with good. We leave vengeance to the Lord (who may bring it in ways we cannot imagine, instead we feed our enemies when they are hungry and give them drink when they are thirsty.

And these small, repeated choices, they shape us and they shape the world. As one of my favourite lines from Deuteronomy has it "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. ***Choose life*** so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

You have a choice, this day, this hour, this minute to choose the way of life, the way of love, however you feel. As it might have appeared in a children's book -
If you could love anyone, who would it be? If you wept for anyone, who would you see? If you could bless anyone, who would you bless? If you rejoiced zealously, what would you sing? You have gifts to give, so what will you bring?

Let love be genuine.