

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 4th November 2018
Deuteronomy 6: 1 - 9; Mark 12: 28 - 34

My brother has very long hair. I used to have very long hair, but my brother still does. That's not the only difference between my brother and me. There are many, too many to list here, but one that always surprises me is that Ian thinks Aberdeen is the best city to live in, in Scotland – and that Aberdeen's football team is the best team to support.

We have different tastes in music and in books as well, not to mention what makes a good night out. There are similarities between us of course; we went to the same school, were brought up in the same home, and many others.

If you looked closely at the differences and the similarities between us they might tell you something about us as individuals, even perhaps our relationship as brothers, but what they don't tell you at all is the extent to which we are brothers – that is, biologically related. There's nothing you can do, no question you can ask, no book you can read, no observation you can make that can tell you whether we – as brothers - are biologically brothers, literally brothers.

The only way you can know that we are brothers in that way is not by looking at the length of our hair or asking about our taste in music or where we went to school or who our parents were, but by finding a way to analyse our DNA. You can't be 100% sure, but if you tested our DNA then you would almost certainly discover whether or not Ian and I are biologically brothers.

To know for certain that we are brothers it is not enough to know that, for example, we are both ministers in the Church of Scotland. We are both ministers in the Church of Scotland, but that tells you nothing about our relationship to one another. You would think though that with us both being ministers in the Church of Scotland you could be certain about one thing. Being both ministers in the Church doesn't prove we are brothers, but surely it must prove that we are both Christians: brothers in Christ.

That might be true – that both being ministers means we are both Christians, but does the fact that we are both ministers mean that you can be certain that we are both Christians? How do you know for certain? After all Ian and I don't just disagree about jazz, or how pleasing it is to see Aberdeen FC languish in mid-table this season, when it comes to ministry in the Church of Scotland we disagree about almost everything. If, when it comes to Christian ministry, we disagree about almost everything, how can you know for certain that we are both Christians?

Here's an example of what we disagree about. As you can see, for me, ministering in a church building is important, as is beautiful organ music and a healthy choir, not to mention an appropriate dress code for a minister leading worship.

But, go to Aberdeen and worship at New Stockethill Parish Church on a Sunday morning where my brother is, and you will enjoy a very different experience. My brother convinced his Kirk Session to sell his church building. For the past ten years the congregation have been worshipping in the local community centre. There's no organ there, they have a band, and no choir. Ian at least puts a shirt on to lead worship, and he even tucks it in to his jeans; what's more he ties his hair back, but you'll never catch him wearing robes.

You should always remember, no matter how bad it gets with me, just what kind of a minister you could have had. Ian and I not only disagree about church buildings, and church music, and how a minister should dress, we disagree too, on fundamentals - how Christians should read the Bible, for example - he takes a much more literalist approach, and we even disagree over which translation of the Bible is worth reading.

We disagree on the theological meaning and the significance of the resurrection; on the manner by which people are saved by Jesus Christ; on the place and power of prayer in daily life.

When we are both called at the same time to be commissioners at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, where all the big decisions in the church are taken, we sit beside each other, but when it comes to voting on those important decisions, we consistently vote in completely different ways.

We may both be ministers in the Church, but if you were to sit us down and talk to us about the Church and about ministry and about faith how could you know for certain that we are both Christians - we disagree on almost everything?

There is nothing about our theologies, or the way we dress, or the way we minister to the congregations we minister to that could make you absolutely certain that we both have a sincere and deep Christian faith. How can two ministers in the Church of Scotland disagree on so much, and yet both be ministers? How can two people who call themselves Christians disagree on so much, and yet both be Christians?

If the only way that you could be sure that two people are biologically brothers is by testing their DNA, their biological core, then the only way that you can know for sure that two people are both Christians is by checking the DNA of their Christianity.

The DNA of Christianity is love. If you can find a test that proves that my brother and I both know that we are loved by God; that we are both compelled by this love to love God in return; and that we both know that loving God means loving our neighbours, then you can be certain that we are both Christians, and can

understand why, despite our differences we are both ministers. But, how would you carry out such a test? How could you test that we love God, and our neighbours in this way?

Well, you could ask us if we love each other. And we do. The outward sign that explains how we can both be Christians and ministers in the same church despite the fact that we disagree about almost everything is - despite our polarised positions - the love we have for each other. The love that Christians have for one another is the outward sign of their Christian DNA. When all is said and done, and despite whatever it is that different Christians disagree about, the love they have for one another is the sign of the love of God in their lives. You will know that we are Christians by our love.

And what's more. They will know - those people who do not come to church, who are out in the world - that we who do come to church, we who are gathered here this morning, that we are all Christians, not because we believe the same things, or do the same things, or feel that the same things are important, but by our love for each other. They will know, that we here today are Christians, by our love for one another.

Love is Christian DNA, and our ability to bind ourselves together in that love is the proof of its existence. That is why when we baptise a baby, at the heart of the baptismal service is a conviction that this child - today, Piper - is loved by God, and consequently is loved by us, and can be baptised with the assurance that this love that God has for her, and that consequently we have for her, is the thing that assures her of her place in this world amongst us.

Without love; without God's love and without love from our neighbours our place in the world rests on weak foundations built in to soft sand. Whether it is in church, or in the society and community that she grows up in, or most importantly in her family, the most significant thing that will determine what kind of a life Piper will lead in the future when she grows up, is how much love she receives.

The love that she receives now will determine how secure she feels in the world - how much she feels loved by God. It will determine how secure she feels in being able to love other people, her neighbours, and it will determine how much she is able to love and respect herself. We love because God loved us first: love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as you love yourself.

You could find out a lot about Christianity by talking to two Christians who disagree with each other; but you will only know what Christianity is by talking to two Christians who disagree with each other, but nevertheless love each other. You could find out a lot about a child's biology by testing his or her DNA, but the most important thing that will determine who Piper grows up to be is not his or her scientific, biological genetic inheritance, it is the love that he or she will inherit from the people around her.

And that is true of us all, all of us individuals in this world each with our own opinions and attitudes, our ways of living; our own style, our different jobs, our own trials and challenges, our own joys and success. The most important commandments: to love God, and to love your neighbour as you love yourself, are not just rules to live by, there are the very things that give substance to life itself.