

Making faith practical*Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21*

The response to the death of American country singer, actress businesswoman and philanthropist, Dolly Parton, who died last week after a brief battle with cancer, has been marked globally. This feisty, sassy, diminutive lady through her music, her personality, her generosity, her open mind and heart, and her faith lived out loud became one of the most loved women in the world. Her career spanned 60 years. At her death it has been estimated that she was 'worth' over \$450M. It has also been calculated that over her career she donated tens of millions to many charities and good causes.

I told you about her Imagination Library - gifting books to children across the world so they could learn and read and dream. During COVID she donated \$1M to help develop a vaccine that would treat the disease. Her non-profit organisation, the Dollywood Foundation, has funded scholarships, hospitals and donated to flood and wildfire victims and set up a bird sanctuary for injured American Bald Eagles. She quietly helped struggling musicians, and supported families going through hard times in the area where she grew up. Her endlessly sunny disposition and her confidence in pushing back against people who mocked her. Her big heart supporting unpopular causes demonstrated her endless charity and compassion.

She had that rare ability of making goodness attractive, with a great degree of wit, humour and self-deprecation. She said:

"The way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you've got to put up with the rain."

"Don't get so busy making a living that you forget to make a life."

She was no po-faced Puritan. In defence of women's equal rights she said: *"I was the first woman to burn my bra - it took the fire department four days to put it out."* And, taking the wind out of the sails of those who criticised her dress style she quipped: *"You'd be surprised how much it costs to look this cheap!"*

One commentator has noted on the current reality of the United States, *"In a world full of Donalds, be a Dolly."*

Much of this stemmed from her obvious but unshowy and pragmatic Christian faith. A lifetime of kindness and charity, often behind the scenes. It has been suggested that she better understood the teachings and working of Jesus than many of the most eminent theologians in the world. Dolly Parton made her faith practical.

In all my ministry I never thought I'd have to work out how to pair the life of Dolly Parton with the teachings of Paul the Apostle in his Letter to the Romans - but here we are. Paul was on fire to preach the good news of the gracious lordship of God expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He deals with problems as contemporary as tomorrow's news. He sets out his thinking about the fate and future of the Jewish people, the role of the individual set in the context of where they are in history as they read this letter, the relationship between citizens and their government, the morality of actions in which adults engage in every aspect of life. Written toward the close of Paul's ministry at some point between 55 to 65AD, to one or more of the Christian house-churches in Rome, so 30 or so years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. This means Paul is writing before, or just at the time the first Gospel, Mark, was being written. And before the other gospels. Paul wants to help those first Christians in Rome to understand a little more about what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. If you believe in God's grace, mercy and love; if you believe God in Jesus wants us not only to believe things but to do things, then what are the kinds of

things that God looks for in the way you live, the way you believe, and the way you show what your belief makes you want to do. For the Christian there is no believing without an active, practical faith. For the Christian there is no active practical faith without some kind of understanding about what we believe and why that matters.

So Paul spells it out with a broad sweep of his arm in answer to anyone who asked: what are some of the things we need to take on board if we are trying to be a Christian? In Rome then; and here now.

Let love be genuine: does your love come from head and heart - or is it just for show and means nothing and costs you less?

Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good: do you stand up against injustice and cruelty and speak out when voices need to be heard? Even if you do not speak up, do your supportive actions towards those who are subjected to prejudice and verbal and physical abuse demonstrate how you believe all God's children should be treated?

Outdo one another in showing honour: modelling decency and fairness in the way you treat others - at home, in the work place, in the public arena, can be contagious. If you show this can be done, others may choose to follow your example.

Never flag in zeal: is there a cause, a charity, a principle to which you dedicate your time and energy? It might not always achieve what you are aiming for, but you keep trying and keep helping and do not give up when the going is hard.

Be aglow with the Spirit: when people look at you, and you're not aware they are looking at you, do they see the love of Jesus in your actions, hear the love of Jesus in your words? You know you've seen this in others. It's not showing off to wonder if others might see it in you from time to time.

Serve the Lord: as a Christian, do you remind yourself from time to time that your best actions and impulses actually help God grow His Kingdom?

Rejoice in hope: even in the darkest days, do you find yourself, undaunted, climbing out of the mirk and into places where the light of hope still shines, and give thanks?

Be patient in tribulation: life is hard and sometimes unfair. Can you thole it knowing God, and other children of God around you, will do their best to help or at least get alongside you?

Be constant in prayer: prayer doesn't arm-wrestle God into submission and get Him to do what you want God to do. Prayer helps you align your hopes, aspirations, dreams to what God graciously wanted for you all along, having your best at heart.

Contribute to the needs of the saints: money, used well, and given generously, can make all the difference in the world.

Practise hospitality: a coffee, a treacle scone, a meal - when we sit beside each other at table we are at the same level, and together.

Bless those who persecute you...: the purposeful cruelty of others reveals their ignorance, their hurt, and the brokenness in their own lives. It's not easy to bear, but be the bigger person, and having blessed them, walk away from them if you must.

Rejoice with those who rejoice: it is good to share in the joy of others. Give them their moment.

Weep with those who weep: Some more wisdom from Dolly Parton - *"I have a strict policy that nobody cries alone in my presence."*

Live in harmony with one another: make a great effort to try to get on with those around you. It creates the best atmosphere in the home, in the work place, wherever you go.

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly: we can often learn more from those who are at the bottom of the pile, or who have not forgotten their roots, than from those who have clawed their way to the top of the pile.

Never be conceited: God sees through you, and what your conceit often tries to hide.

Repay no one evil for evil: getting caught up in seeking revenge, or harbouring grudges, diminishes your soul.

Live peaceably with all: if you can, don't let the sun go down on your anger or an argument. Make amends, make up if it is at all possible.

As I wrote this sermon, and as I preach it now, I remain convinced this is not a counsel of perfection and beyond the reach of any human being. Rather, it is an indication of a work in progress - which surely is all that we are. Trying, failing, trying again, and perhaps, much to your surprise, doing more good in the world than you might ever realise. But you are doing something, being something, that shows to God, to others, to yourself, that you are making *your faith* practical.

In a world full of hurt, and pain, and fear, and meanness, be a Dolly. As she said: *"Dream more, learn more, care more, and be more."*

Or as Paul said: *"Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord."*

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen