

Sermon on Sunday 31 October 2021

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Psalm 119. 1-8 and Mark 12. 28-34

The problem with love

The problem with love, the word 'love', is that in our language we only have one word; 'love'. So, I love my wife; I love sticky toffee pudding. And that makes it difficult sometimes, I think, to talk about God's love in any meaningful way. For instance, I can't think of three words more powerful, yet more trite, than 'Jesus loves you'.

And maybe that's because Jesus has become just another word for niceness; an anemic fiction. Or, maybe it's been overused and therefore undervalued, or maybe it's because his followers make a fiction of that love when they only pay lip service to it.

We all agree that love is the reason; it's why we're here; it is our meaning and our making; the ultimate Reality. God is love, and all love flows from that source. So, how then do we speak more meaningfully of this love divine?

One way, perhaps, is actually to speak less. As St Francis supposedly said, 'Preach Christ at all times. If necessary, use words.'

The word 'Love' is both a noun and a verb. The problem with

'Love' the noun, is that when reduced to an emotion; a feeling, automatically it's destined to lose its power when those feelings fade, as inevitably they do. Much, much more importantly, love is a verb; a doing word. Love is action. So, if I say, 'I love you', the only real proof of that love actually is through presence, listening, compassion; through meaningful touch and acts of kindness, sacrifice, service. Without these, words mean nothing, nada, nowt.

Love should be intentional. Every moment we choose to love by doing the most loving thing in that moment. And sometimes that can mean stepping up, and sometimes it can mean stepping back.

Love should be given freely with no expectation of pay-back. I heard this week, for example, the lovely story of someone who always pays for the car behind them in the drive-thru at McDonald's. The simplest act of love without strings.

Mostly, however, our love of course comes with strings attached, even if it's just that pay-back of feeling good. But, let's not struggle with that inevitability, let's just accept that our motives will always be mixed.

Love helps us discover what we're made of and what we're made for.

Love is not an option, it's actually a command. In our reading this morning and elsewhere; 'Love God with everything you are... love others... love yourself'. And, infuriatingly, Jesus would take it one

step further into the near-impossible command; 'Love your enemy'.

It's the people we don't like or who don't like us who actually teach us where love is in our lives. And sometimes, of course, that enemy is within. Loving the enemy can be learning to love ourselves. Not in some narcissistic way, but rightly and appropriately; accepting that we are inherently loveable.

When that enemy within, when that inner critic is accusing and belittling us; when we're harder on ourselves than we would ever be on another person, a good thing to try is to imagine that you are speaking to your five-year-old self, because always we'll be kinder, and that kindness can release a new compassion inwards. We begin to see ourselves as we are seen... by Love Him, Her, Itself... by God.

Let's face it; love is tough, mainly because sometimes we've been loved poorly, incompletely, conditionally. And so, we love poorly, incompletely, conditionally. The crucial thing, however, is what we do with that pain, because we'll either, as Richard Rohr says, transform it or transmit it.

Nadia Bolz Weber believes that the ability to see ourselves as God sees us grows dimmer when we transmit our pain onto others through 'arrogance, impatience, unkindness, envy, selfishness'. She goes on to talk about that famous passage of Paul's which talks about a love 'that isn't mushy and sentimental. It's tough and unwilling to yield.... And here's what's scary about this kind of

love: you can't manipulate it. There is no amount of weight loss, piety, personality management, big smiles, or strained pretense that can affect this love. And,' she says, 'in the absence of manipulation we stand bare before the eyes of God. This love is found in the gaze of God as God looks upon us naked and whole. Because this type of love is characterised by the giver, not the receiver. Gone are the strivings and manipulations and efforts to make ourselves more lovable. In the face-to-face gaze of the Beloved, we are known because we are loved. We aren't loved because we are known - that leads again to trying to make ourselves lovable.'

Nadia goes on to say, 'The truth of who you are is found in the eyes of God, not the eyes of the world. It is the love of God who created this world and called it Good. It is the love of a God... who walked among us as Jesus of Nazareth, it is the love of the God who knit you together in your mother's womb that gets to tell you who you are. Nothing else. Not the media, not a family who wishes you were different, and not even yourself. Only the God who knows and loves you fully can tell you who you are. And this is true of everyone, the good the bad and the boring.'

She cites the movie Dead Man Walking where 'Sister Helen Prejean offered pastoral care to a despicable murderer. He was an unrepentant, wretched man. Yet her faith in a loving God allowed her, moments before his execution, to say to him, "I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you."

'I think Paul might be telling us to be the face of love for each other. When we know that we are loved by God in the fullness of God's knowledge of us we are free to live in this love. Free to transmit the love of Christ in a hurting world. Free to see ourselves and others as God sees us. Not because we are good, but because we are loved. And seeing just a glimpse, wanting it, moving toward it, brings us closer to what is promised to us forever: that we will see God, who is love, face to face.'

Many centuries ago, Emperor Hadrian called for a report on the Christian movement (to give himself justification to outlaw it). Aristides, one of his officials wrote, 'Christians love one another', followed by a list of the things he saw. He concluded with, 'This is really a new kind of person. There is something divine in them.'



*'Love helps us
discover what we're
made of and what
we're made for'*

To love is divine and our call (no pressure!) is to be that new kind of person who, because we have seen ourselves as God sees us, can love others, including our enemy, including ourselves.

Love is a noun; love is a verb; Love is a Person.

Today, how will we live so that others won't even have to hear that Jesus loves them; they'll know, because you'll show them; you'll speak of it loud and clear ... without words.

Readings

Mark 12. 28-34

The Greatest Commandment

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'^[e] ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'^[f] ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[g] There is no commandment greater than these."

³² "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

Psalm 119. 1-8

ⲕ Aleph

- ¹ Blessed are those whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the LORD.
- ² Blessed are those who keep his statutes
and seek him with all their heart—
- ³ they do no wrong
but follow his ways.
- ⁴ You have laid down precepts
that are to be fully obeyed.
- ⁵ Oh, that my ways were steadfast
in obeying your decrees!
- ⁶ Then I would not be put to shame
when I consider all your commands.
- ⁷ I will praise you with an upright heart
as I learn your righteous laws.
- ⁸ I will obey your decrees;
do not utterly forsake me.