

God's eternal love-song

a sermon preached on the
feast of candlemass

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by dr wendy crouch

the lections: Malachi 3: 1-4; Psalm 24; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40.

Thank you very much John for your invitation to preach today. This is a significant occasion for me as I prepare to depart from here after 22 years or so in the parish, and it is very good to have the opportunity for some last words. The last time I preached was exactly twelve months ago, also on Candlemass or the Presentation of Christ. I focussed then on the faithful prayerful waiting of the holy 'tag team' of Simeon and Anna, and their openness to the divine light in the infant Jesus.

Today I want to focus on gifts, and specifically the gift of Love.

From our recent experiences over the Christmas season, we know that gifts come in many shapes and sizes and quality. But the most precious are given out of genuine love.

The first gift we hear about in the gospel reading today is Mary's giving over of her baby son to the hands of a stranger in the temple. For any mother this initial handing of a new baby to another can be difficult. But even more for this mother; she has heard from the angel Gabriel, Elizabeth and the shepherds, that this child is a special gift from God to the world – a gift that has been promised for hundreds of years. So Mary is also surrendering her infant son to his divine destiny, although she hardly comprehends what that means at this point.

I wonder, when her arms are empty, what is that absence like? Does her heart cry out in fear? Perhaps it is not just in the future that a sword will pierce Mary's heart, but right here and now it begins.

Up to this point Mary has had that intimate closeness of most mothers to their newborn, a type of symbiotic relationship, a mutual gaze of love. What a hunger there is in the love of an infant for its mother, and of a mother for her infant. And if a woman is breastfeeding her infant, usually such an attunement that the baby's cry immediately triggers a physical let down reflex of milk, with all of its often-messy consequences. Such is the physiological imperative of love. And the build-up of milk between feeds, particularly when there is an abundant supply, can result in a painful throbbing in the breasts.

This intense and immediate experience of mother-infant love is vividly depicted in a twelfth century icon, the Eleousa or Vladimir icon, Virgin of Loving Kindness. We have a copy of that icon in this church by the candle stand. If you have a close look you will see that Mary's hand gestures towards the child Jesus whose arm is wrapped around her neck as he eagerly and energetically climbs up her. Not just a picture of the love of Mary for her child, but the warm, hungry, passionate and shameless love of the infant for its mother. And not just any infant in this case but the Christ child, Godself. Rowan Williams, in his beautiful description of this icon describes how God is just like this – God's love is hungry, immediate, intense and imperative.

And it is this gift of God's love I now want to turn to. In Luke's gospel there is a wonderful little three letter Greek word *dei* (*δει*), that Luke uses over and over again to depict this urgent imperative, the

absolute necessity, the **must**, of God's love for all. This word **dei** throbs through the gospel like a heartbeat – it is the beating heart of relentless divine love, or, using the maternal image, a throbbing of milk in the divine breast longing to be released.

It is this imperative of divine love, or divine necessity, that underlies the purposeful relentless activity of Jesus we see in Luke's gospel, as he moves from cradle to cross; it is that which propels him to Jerusalem (Lk 9:51) and the suffering he knows he will face there.

Let us listen to some of Jesus' words and the **must** or **dei** that throbs through them:

Jesus in the temple at the age of 12: *I **must** be (**dei**) about the things or domain of my heavenly Father God (2:49).*

*Luke 4:43: I **must** preach the good news of the kingdom – for I was sent for this purpose*

*Luke 9:22: the Son of Man **must** suffer*

*13: 32-33: I **must** go on my way (to Jerusalem and death and suffering)*

And later following his resurrection: 'Was it not necessary 'dei' that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'

Yes, it is absolutely necessary. Because the throbbing heartbeat of God's love cannot stop. Jesus wonderfully depicts this when he tells the parable of the man with two sons (a better title than the prodigal son). This Middle Eastern father does something totally shameful and humiliating in the culture of that time – he picks up his robes and runs down the road to greet his wayward and disgraced son. What a wonderful image of the mystery and wonder of God's love that is always seeking us.

And so, the gift of Mary, the gift of God's love, and now, connected with these, **I** would like to give you a gift, a parting gift. This is part of my personal story to ordination.

Some of you know that I was heading to ordination many years ago and withdrew and became a psychologist instead.

But nearly exactly two years ago here at St John's, I had an experience that was a reigniting of my call to priesthood. It was the Lent retreat day here in 2017 led by Fr David Moore, and following a meditation and a period of silence, I sat at the front of the church, gazing at the sanctuary, and the altar and lectern covered in purple cloth. I was suddenly overwhelmed with the experience of God with me. As if things that had been disjointed within me had come together and been gathered up in an intense whoosh of God's overwhelming presence. I wept, and wept, and wept, and knew that there was nothing more important than to know God and God's love, and to follow through on sharing that love with others.

I vividly retain a mental image I had that day of the church – as if it were full of people, and of a strong longing, to turn around and proclaim – God is here – feel, touch, know God's love. Open your eyes. Know that you are utterly loved. Of course, that day in 2017 there were just a few people here quietly praying and I was still weeping too much to say anything.

But today is different! You *are* here gathered, and *now* as I leave this parish community, it is time for me to speak of the gift of God's loving presence, here, now, palpable. God is here – feel, touch, hear God's love. *Now* is the time for me to speak of the absolute truth of God's love for each one, that powerful, intense, passionate love and kindness that embraces each of us here and now.

But this gift I am sharing with you this day is only possible because of another gift, the gift that you have given over many years to me and to many others – the gift of this space, this temple, a prayerful space, a welcoming space, in which the Holy Spirit has been able to work. And I thank you all for that

wonderful gift. Your gift is just like the gift that Anna and Simeon gave to humanity through their prayerful patient waiting over many years for God's implosion into history. When Jesus and his parents came in to the temple that day, Simeon and Anna recognised that in this tiny infant was the fulfillment of all the mystery and wonder of God in all God's saving glory. Finally, they can sing and speak out, and what is the song we hear them sing? It is God's eternal throbbing love-song.

This is what the Presentation of Christ truly signifies, the gift to us and all humanity of the imperative of divine love: God's extravagant, costly, never-holding back, always welcoming, love and grace for all.

So as we each journey on from here, *we* are invited to respond to God's love-song and to sing it with all our hearts, that the music of it may reverberate through time and space, bringing the light of Christ to all.

The Lord be with you all