

making the love of God real

a sermon preached on the
fifth sunday of easter

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 8: 26-40; Psalm 116; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15: 1-8.

'Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving, know nothing of God, for God is love' (1John 4.7).

If we were going to list the most important passages in the scriptures this verse would surely have to be in everyone's list, because here we read for the first time that God is love. Perhaps we are so familiar with these words that we imagine that they are frequently found in the Bible. The reality is just 28 pages from the end is the first time we come across this phrase. We've followed the story of Israel for a 1,000 years, we have watched the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and we've seen the early church begin to grow. And now it is about 80 years after the crucifixion and John sums up what it has all been about. God, he says, is love!

First, love is the essence of God. From the very beginning of the Biblical story there has never been any doubt that there is a divine reality to life. But by its very nature this reality is mysterious, difficult to grasp and understand. To speak of God is to attempt to describe 'the ground of our being'. It is to speak of the source of life, the mystery of our being and the being of all that is. We cannot define it or understand it. All we can do is describe what we have experienced.

In the history of the human family, people begin by seeing God as little different from the tyrannical rulers of the empires that existed. 'Yahweh is a man of war,' they say. They try to appease God with sacrificial offerings, sometimes food, sometimes animals, sometimes even people. They imagine that God wishes them to slaughter their enemies. Gradually their ideas change. Hosea shows them the forgiveness of God. Amos the moral righteousness. So as we read the biblical stories the idea of God is always changing—with old ideas being cast aside as new truth dawns and old images discarded as their inadequacy becomes plain. Increasingly one fact becomes plain to them. That love is the essence of God. The psalmist, says, 'The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want'. If they need final proof Christ gives it to them. John says, 'this is how he showed his love among us, he sent his only son into the world'. God is love—such is the experience at the centre of faith.

Then secondly, if God is love this defines our fundamental task as a church. The great evangelical preacher Leslie Weatherhead used to summarize the task of preaching as making the love of God real. This is the basic task of not only our preaching but of the whole life of the church. We are here to make the love of God real. This is our calling; this is what we must aspire to in our lives.

The truth, sadly, is that the church does not always succeed in this. Too often in practice the church has managed to make God seem a harsh authoritarian figure that one approaches with fear. There is a story of James who grew up in a severe and strict Baptist background. Fear was real and tangible for the seven-year-old James. On one occasion he came home and found the house deserted and he thought that the Second coming had occurred and that he had been left behind because of the wickedness of his sins. He felt terrible shame and guilt. Even as an adult James was not able to fully shake off his sense of guilt.

How many lives have been damaged through fear filled religion? But our task is to make real the love of God. Of course love is never just soft. Sometimes there is a challenging prophetic word that needs to be spoken. But life is rarely an easy experience. Many of us are hurting much of the time, either at home, work or at church. Sometimes we need challenges but above all we need a word that gives us hope and courage. We need to hear over and over again that God does love us and does want to comfort us in our pain and distress. To make the love of God real—that is the task of the church.

And then, thirdly, if God is love this is not just comfort: it is also demand. John says, 'If God so loved us dear friends, we must love one another'. This begins in our personal relationships. John says 'If someone says I love God while hating his fellow Christian he is a liar'. We are, says St Paul, 'to rejoice with those who do rejoice, and to weep with those who weep'. Love must begin in the only place it can begin: in our relationships with those who are closest to.

But then it must go out to the wider community. Let us consider the question of world poverty. We are in a world of terrible need, poverty and violence. Every year between 15 and 20 million people die of starvation or absolute poverty. About 12 million of these are children under the age of 5. Today as on every day 40,000 people will die from poverty, 30,000 of them children.

No talk of love can have any meaning at all that does not include a concern for questions like this. This does involve support of organisations like Anglichord and the Christmas Bowl, but it is also the search for justice. What is the point of giving money to help a child clinic in Zambia if we do nothing about the way that Zambia pays back more interest on its debts than can spend on its whole health service? What is the point of tree planting in a third world country if we do nothing about how whole forests are cleared to repay debt? Love means politics—a willingness to seek changes in the world and to challenge injustices. The non-political church is quite simply a church that is failing to love. Martin Luther King wrote:

Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.

'God is love': this is the very heart of the Gospel. It lays bare the essence of God. It gives us our task as a church. And it needs to be lived out both in our personal relationships and in commitment to social justice. Yes, 'Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God, for God is love'.