Sermon for 6th of Easter Year B

Readings: Acts 10:44 - 48; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

i

Love comes in many shapes and sizes. We love our mum; we love cats; we love swimming off the bright sandy beach and so on. When John speaks about love, he is talking about what the Greeks called *agape –* which is a generous love or concern for other people’s welfare without prejudice or constraint. It is the word used in Greek to describe God. Today we will see how John examines the implications of divine love in the light of what God has done in Christ when we look at today’s passages from 1 John 5:1-6 and John 15:9-17.

Quoting Jesus’ image of the vine, John argues that only love that is rooted in and nourished by the love of God will survive and thrive and produce good spiritual fruit. To love is what it means to follow God. Without love, you are simply not a follower of God whatever your fine words and lofty ideals.

Jesus is the vine, the nourishing source of divine love and only in fellowship with Christ can our lives be transformed by God’s love and become conduits of God’s grace for the world. For Christians, love is Jesus-shaped. Jesus is the embodiment of divine love and in communion with Christ our love is kept from lapsing into selfishness or partiality.

People may be ‘religious’, or to use that nebulous modern term, ‘spiritual’, but what religion or spirituality actually delivers to the believer or the world differs tremendously, depending upon its source. Some forms of religion and spirituality can become the source of hatefulness and violence, or at the other extreme, effete self-absorption. Christianity says true love is robust, with roots in God through Christ. Christian love is Jesus-shaped.

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John explores Jesus-shaped love in more detail in his epistle. In 1 John 5:1-6 John argues that Jesus-shaped love enables us to overcome the partiality, fickleness and selfishness we so often get with worldly forms of loving.

Jesus-shaped love comes from water and blood, says John. Firstly, it comes from the cleansing water of our baptism in which we acknowledge our imperfection and our inability to love and live as we ought in our own strength alone and we accept the gift of God’s grace to enable us to love and live as we should. But we must remain in fellowship with Christ, attached to the true vine.

Jesus-shaped love comes also from the blood of Christ – for Christian love is sacrificial love that considers others more important than self. It is a tremendously difficult thing to truly and consistently put the interests of others above and before self, although we all see examples around us between parents and children or between friends and lovers, or service of one’s country, but it is by no means an easy way to live.

John says that Christ lifts the burden of such a type of loving. This is because our faith in Christ gives us confidence that such sacrificial love wins out in the end. Sometimes such sacrificial love is mistaken by the world for weakness, sometimes it is mistaken for foolishness or for futility, but because of Christ, we believe that sacrificial love is the only path that leads ultimately to new, sustaining and transforming life.

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Keeping attached to the true vine is the only way of keeping our loving Jesus-shaped. Without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, our loving soon gets crushed back into worldly loving. Traditionally, abiding in Christ has been mediated through the Church; she is our Mother who nurtures us with the good solid food of the gospel through Word and sacrament. Our Mother Church oversees our hearts and lives to prevent our religious or spiritual inclinations turning bad.

Unfortunately, some manifestations of Church do not foster the spirit of Jesus. Some Churches are not Jesus-shaped in their loving, but shaped more by the personality of the pastor, or the crushing weight of the institution. So make sure your church nourishes your faith rather than starves it, or crushes it, or corrupts it. We cannot live without the Church, but there are some churches we should shun because they would destroy our Jesus-shaped faith rather than build it up.

In Acts 10:44-48 we see one of the early examples of how a religious institution risked crushing the faith out of some believers. The circumcised Jewish believers who accompanied Peter to Cornelius’ house were astonished that God gave his Holy Spirit to gentile believers such as Cornelius and his household. This was a historically critical moment. Would the selfish, partial understanding of divine love that had pertained within the Jewish tradition keep gentile believers firmly locked out of the Church, or would a new, more open understanding of God’s grace be now possible through Christ? Fortunately, Peter, the leader of the Christian community, was on hand to give the lead.

But which side of the argument would you have been on that day in Cornelius’ house?

Worldly-shaped loving is deeply ingrained within us. It is so tempting to believe there is some particular quality about us, or about something we have done or said that makes us deserving recipients of God’s love. For Peter and his companions, they had centuries of tradition that told them they were special because they were Jews.

Perhaps John was right to say our faith in Christ has made Jesus-shaped loving so much easier, because Peter seems to have immediately grasped the totally new epoch into which the Spirit of Christ was leading him and **ordered** on the spot that Cornelius and his household be baptised immediately in the name of Jesus Christ. And to prove he was serious about the historic divide between Jew and gentile having been torn down, Peter stayed on at Cornelius’ home for the next few days.

But how would you have fared? Who are the ones that it would surprise you to discover that God loves them as much as he loves you? What are the things that you inwardly believe make you more deserving of God’s love?

And who is Cornelius in your world? Who do you wish to keep at a greater distance from God than you are? Which group do you wish to stand in front of so that you are closer to God and they stand behind you, further away from divine love?

It is a painful question to ask, but ask it we must, if we are serious about maintaining a Jesus-shaped love for the world.

Peter started the work that day at Cornelius’ house by tearing down one of the long-standing and apparently immovable barriers between God and the world. But that was only the beginning. Many more barriers have fallen since, but there are still many still standing – some are easier to identify than others, those labelled under gender, race, sexuality, social status are the more obvious ones than have been torn down in many places in recent generations, but they still exist in places, and there are still walls of prejudice we have yet to perceive, but search for them and destroy them we must, until the worldly way of loving is replaced by the Jesus way of loving – both in the Church and in the world.

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**May 2017**