

WORSHIP AT HOME – AMAZING LOVE – 24TH MAY 2020

Introduction

This week I would like us to think about the awesome and amazing love shown to us by God through Jesus Christ his Son and our Saviour. This weekend Ian and I should have been in Oberammergau to see the Passion Play, which we now hope to see in May 2022. We were fortunate enough to have seen it in 2010 and the power of it lives with me – some scenes imprinted on my mind. What I felt so strongly was the love of Jesus shining through – his willingness to die for our sins and his forgiveness of others even when he was in agony and close to death. An amazing love; and I am using the theme of love as the basis for this service, In which I have included some meditations and ideas taken from 'A Quiet Word 2' by Nick Fawcett.

Call to worship:

Day by day, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray;
to see thee more clearly - to love thee more dearly – to follow thee more nearly, day by day.
[Attributed to St Richard of Chichester [c.1197 – 1253]

Hymn: Words of 'Come let us sing of a wonderful love' written by Robert Walmsley [1831-1905] StF 443

1 Come, let us sing of a wonderful love, tender and true;
out of the heart of the Father above,
streaming to me and to you:
wonderful love dwells in the heart of the Father above.

2 Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell, joyfully came;
came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
sharing their sorrow and shame;
seeking the lost, saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

3 Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet, why do they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
home, weary wanderer, home!
Wonderful love dwells in the heart of the Father above.

4 Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love, come and abide,
lifting my life, till it rises above
envy and falsehood and pride;
seeking to be lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

Prayer: Almighty God, speak to us of your greatness and of your awesome creative power. Speak of your purpose and of your hand in history. Speak of your will, of the people you would have us be.

And speak above all of your love, and of how it should shape every aspect of our lives.

Help us to understand not only that you *show* love, but that you *are* love. Help us to understand what it is all about, and that, even though we may sometimes fail to love you, you will go on loving us always.

Teach us ever more of what that means so that each day may be filled with grateful praise and heartfelt joy. In Christ's holy name we pray. Amen.

However long we might talk about love and what it means to love someone we should never cover every aspect. But featuring strongly would most likely be the idea of commitment , of staying true to the one we

love even at some cost to ourselves. Once we are fully committed to someone we love we are ready to put *them* first – even to risk our own well-being to safeguard theirs – to make sacrifices in order to bring them happiness. We love our families, friends – people who are close to us throughout our lives..

According to the gospels, that is the sort of love God has for us – a love that echoes our own but which goes so very much further. So let us consider passages from the Gospels which speak of his amazing love for us all.

As we come to our first passage, first just think what it might be like if the people who love us actually knew our every thought, every weakness, every flaw! Would they still go on loving us just as much – hopefully, yes. But there is a real possibility that such knowledge might drive a wedge between us and gradually eat away at the relationship. It isn't always that easy to see the worst and yet still go on loving in just the same way.

Because humans find it hard, often they feel subconsciously that God is like us. We know he really does see us just as we are and we worry that he is shocked because of that. So, instead of opening up to him and celebrating his forgiveness, we often labour under feelings of guilt. We are fearful of God rather than joyfully trusting.

The apostles' experience shows how misplaced our feelings can, for in Jesus they found someone who accepted them as they were, warts and all. He was well aware of their faults but he loved them just the same – just as he does us.

Reading: Mark 9: 30-37: [using the Revised English Bible].

They left that district and made their way through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know, because he was teaching his disciples, and telling them, 'The Son of Man is now to be handed over into the power of men, and they will kill him; and three days after being killed he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he said, and were afraid to ask.

So they came to Capernaum; and when he had gone indoors, he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?'. They were silent, because upon the way they had been discussing which of them was the greatest. So he sat down, called the Twelve,, and said to them, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a child, and set him in front of them, and put his arm round him. 'Whoever receives a child like this in my name,' he said, 'receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but the God who sent me.'

Meditation of Simon the Zealot, one of the Twelve:

Did he need to ask what we were talking about? Somehow I don't think so, for he always seemed to know what we were thinking even before we knew it ourselves. The question was not for his benefit but for ours – helping us to see ourselves as we really were, in all our weakness and with all our faults.

He waited, mind you, till we were behind closed doors, not wanting to embarrass us – but we were ashamed nonetheless, standing tongue-tied before him like those caught hiding some guilty secret.

We were arguing, you see, over who was the greatest – each claiming to be the best – and the higher we tried to position ourselves, the lower we stooped, a downward spiral to the bottom.

Why do we do it? Why do we build ourselves up by putting others down, as if our worth must be measured at their expense? It's the way of the world, I suppose, but it's not *his* way, as we were soon to learn, for he put others first and self last – he, who was truly the greatest, making himself least.

He saw the worst of us, but also the best – the bad, but also the good – sacrificing his all for people like us, and when we think now of everything he did, everything he gave, we – who thought ourselves so special – suddenly feel so very small.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we marvel at your love for we are unworthy of it – weak, disobedient, foolish. We think more highly of ourselves than we should. We judge others, condemning their faults while failing to see our own. Forgive our pride, our arrogance, our presumption, and help us to recognise that we all fall short – we all depend on your grace for acceptance rather than on any merit of our own. Teach us to put *you* first and others before ourselves, walking humbly in the footsteps of Christ who, for our sake, offered his all. In his precious name we pray. Amen.

Comment:

Perhaps we may find ourselves able to see someone's faults and still love them just as much – but how do we feel if we show our love only to find it thrown back at us? When we feel our love rejected, denied, betrayed it can indeed be hard to keep on loving just the same. We feel hurt, maybe even bitter and angry. In extreme circumstances that earlier love may turn to hate instead. But that is what Jesus had to endure. He was abandoned by so many who had followed him – and that included his closest disciples. He was denied by Peter and betrayed by Judas. But despite it all, Jesus went on loving as much as ever – loving enough to keep going steadfastly toward the cross. In him we see devotion – a love amazing beyond words.

Reading from John 13: 21-32 [The Revised English Bible]

Jesus exclaimed in deep distress, 'In very truth I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.' The disciples looked at one another in bewilderment: which of them could he mean? One of them, the disciple whom he loved, was reclining close beside Jesus. Simon Peter signalled to him to find out which one he meant. That disciple leaned close to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus replied, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' Then he took it, dipped it in the dish and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas had received it, Satan entered him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you have to do,' No one at the table understood what he meant by this. Some supposed that, as Judas was in charge of the common purse, Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to make some gift to the poor. As soon as Judas had received the bread he went out. It was night.

Meditation of the Apostle John:

We didn't have a clue – not the first idea what was going on, so we looked round in utter confusion. What could he mean: one of us would betray him?

We were his friends; devoted and loyal to a man – or so, at least, we had thought, but it was scary how quickly that assumption changed. Suddenly we doubted each other, our expressions reflecting a mixture of guilt and accusation – our eyes studiously averted from too long a gaze. I could tell some even wondered about *me* – and why not, for clearly our assessment of character was not as good as we'd liked to think. Even after Judas got up and went out, having taken that piece of bread,, we still didn't get it, assuming instead that he had some pressing business needing attention. But Jesus knew what he was up to, as he had no doubt known all along.

What, then, of you and me? Does he know what we're thinking too - what's going on deep inside?

I rather think he may do, and that's what disconcerting, to put it mildly, for there's so much I'd rather keep hidden, firmly under wraps.

Would he still have time for me if he knew the worst?

Would he still welcome me as a follower if he saw who I really am?

I'd think twice in his shoes, that's for sure.

But I tell you what – when Jesus dipped that bread into the dish and gave it to Judas, there was no anger in his eyes, no disgust or rejection. Quite the opposite.

It was as though he cared for him as much as ever – as though he still valued him as a friend.

Could that be true?

Could Jesus have died not only *because* of Judas, but *for* him as well?

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The Good Shepherd:

We talk of the sacrificial love of Jesus – of his willingness to give everything because of his love for the world. But do we actually believe it? It takes some grasping, after all. It's not easy to take it all in. To help us to understand – to feel it for ourselves, Jesus likened himself to a shepherd, willing to lay down his life for his sheep, their welfare being his only concern.

Reading: John 10: 11-18 [The Revised English Bible]:

I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The hired man, when he sees the wolf coming, abandons the sheep and runs away, because he is not the shepherd and the sheep are not his. Then the wolf harries the flock and scatters the sheep. The man runs away because he is a hired man and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. But there are other sheep of mine, not belonging to this fold; I must lead them as well, and they too will listen to my voice. There will then be one flock, one shepherd. The Father loves me because I lay down my life, to receive it back again. No-one takes it away from me; I am laying it down of my own free will. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to receive it back again; this charge I have received from my Father.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, words cannot thank you enough for your goodness to us – for your patience, concern and devotion. Repeatedly we go astray; yet you seek us out, never resting till we are found. We ignore your guidance, yet you continue to call, gently leading us back. Though we are foolish and fickle, naively following the crowd, you stay true to us, refusing to let us go.

For your awesome love that gave everything to bring us life, Lord, we thank you and praise you and give you our heartfelt worship.

Sometimes, Lord, we know we don't listen properly to you but easily get distracted. Or we may listen, but still go our own way, thinking we know best. There are times, Lord, when we find it hard to believe that you will meet our needs and take care of us, feeding us with spiritual and physical food.

Sometimes, we are anything but prepared for our journey with you, tending to look for our own ways out of a situation, instead of seeking and trusting in you. We are sorry, Lord, forgive us.

Forgiven by you, Lord, we can start afresh.

Today, Lord, we pray for those who have little or nothing; for those who feel trapped in their situation and can't see the bigger picture – not even a tiny glimmer of light.

We pray for those who are hungry – for parents who struggle to feed their children, and themselves. Teach us not to be wasteful with all that we have, but to preserve and pass on all that we can – and to pass on all that we have received from you. Amen

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever Amen.

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The love which Jesus showed throughout his ministry was for those whom others might have considered to be undeserving, or even unlovable. He showed this throughout his ministry – and it is what God extends to us. He is not remote or aloof from our humanity – he is not judgemental or vindictive. He doesn't punish us for our failures – nor does he love us *only* as much as we love him. With God there are no strings attached – there are no conditions. He just loves us because that is his nature.

This is a truth which we need to grasp not only in our heads, but in our hearts.

It is amazing that such love is streaming out to us – it may seem too good to be true, but true it is. It is what God is and what he offers to all.

God is love.

Words of 'In Heavenly Love Abiding' written by Anna Laetitia Waring [1823-1910] Singing the Faith 736 {Based on psalm 23}

1 In heavenly love abiding, no change my heart shall fear;
and safe is such confiding, for nothing changes here;
the storm may roar without me, my heart may low be laid;
but God is round about me, and can I be dismayed?

2 Wherever he may guide me, no want shall turn me back;
my Shepherd is beside me, and nothing can I lack:
his wisdom ever waketh, his sight is never dim;
he knows the way he taketh, and I will walk with him.

3 Green pastures are before me, which yet I have not seen;
bright skies will soon be o'er me, where darkest clouds have been;
my hope I cannot measure, my path to life is free;
my Saviour has my treasure, and he will walk with me.

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A piece written by David Adam to illustrate The Good Shepherd. [He was the Vicar of Lindisfarne for 13 years until he retired in 2003. He has written many inspiring books on spirituality and prayer – and his Celtic writings have rekindled a keen interest in our Christian heritage.]

There was a group of shepherds who often talked about caring for their sheep. Yet, when trouble came, some did not want to bother; others said the sheep were not worth the risk; one or two took the money and left. One could be heard saying: 'You cannot believe a lamb is worth the life of a shepherd.' The reply from a hired man: 'Of course it isn't.'

Listening to all this was the good shepherd. It made him sad to think that the sheep were not truly loved. He loved his sheep dearly and would do anything to save them.

Suddenly an old man came to him and said: 'I have been looking at your flock and you have a lamb missing. She has wandered off and is in danger of death.'

The shepherd left the comfort of home and the safety of his surroundings and began the search. Some were sure he should not have bothered. There were plenty of other sheep so why bother with a wayward one? The shepherd's life was more precious than the lamb's.

The shepherd was soon travelling dark valleys. More than once he was at risk himself. Briars tore at his hands and his feet. There was a gaping hole in his side. Thorns had pierced his head.

He was calling the lamb by name. At last there was a weak response. It was down a steep slope and in danger of falling further.

The shepherd did not fear but descended into the depths. The darkness was trying to hold on to the lamb. The shepherd reached into the thorn bushes and became entangled – he was caught alongside the lamb. Even now he reached out to comfort it.

There he lay, life ebbing out of him. He was trapped for more than forty-eight hours.

But on the third day he broke free and rising up brought the lamb with him. He carried it all the way home. When they saw him they rejoiced. 'Just see how much he loves his flock and what he was willing to suffer for one little ewe lamb.'

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What an amazing love our Lord has for us!

Closing Prayer and Blessing:

No matter who you are or what you have done;
no matter where you are or what you are facing;
no matter how you feel or whether you understand it;
the truth is this: you can go in hope, joy and peace,
for Christ is with you through good times and dark,
his love surrounds you and his arms enfold you. Amen

And may the love of God; the Father who created us; the Son who found us and saved us; and the Holy Spirit who lives and works within us be with us and those whom we love today and for all eternity. Amen.