

Love and Christ's Cross

14 August 2022
9th after Trinity
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Isaiah 5.1-7
Hebrews 11.29 - 12.2
Luke 12.49-56

Fragile suburbia

We are people who live in suburbia. In fact about 85% of people in Britain live in suburbia. This is in contrast to the centre of cities which can be the centre of trade, decision making, great wealth or deprivation. On the other hand there is the countryside with a life revolving around agriculture or dormitory towns which may also have quite a suburban feel about them.

The development of suburbia took place over many decades and have provided good quality housing for a vast number of people along with good social services such as health, education and shops. It is almost like a dream come true.

A particular time when this vision was shattered happened during the Second World War when cities became the target of bombing. In fact after the famous raid on Coventry Churchill feared that the nations spirit would be broken. But during the war, Britain knuckled down to what was known as the home front. People lived in what was now a risky safe domesticity which in its own way contributed to the war effort.

In recent years suburbia can again seem precarious. There are changes in the fortunes of the economy, unemployment, house repossessions and consumption contributing to global warming.

I wonder if we found a similar sense of shock will with the readings we had from the Bible today?

Three tough passages

I guess we come to church for many reasons but I imagine there is something about being inspired, finding peace and a refuge from the hurley burly of life.

The passage from Isaiah spoke about God being wounded by his people as they had departed from the good life they were called to. This will lead to judgment.

The passage from Hebrews was about people of faith who showed immense courage and determination in a world but treated them so poorly. No tidy, safe spirituality here.

Our gospel passage had Jesus speaking of people rejecting his disciples and causing division. What Jesus brought as the Good News of the Kingdom of God would for some turn into persecution.

For some people such passages should be left to one side. 'let's be spiritual' they might say and bring us just words of comfort.

For some people these passages are a puzzle and to be sorted out by people who like that sort of thing. In the mean time they are a part of an old tradition so let's keep it; but at arm's length.

But supposing these passages really are bang up to date and as we live in a world with places of horror and challenge. There is a cost of living crisis, a drought, a war in the Ukraine and our government still working out what leadership means. These Bible passages are a resource to enable us to persevere and maybe even flourish.

Heart and cross

You might have seen in our latest newsletter an image of two wooden objects used for devotion. One is a heart and the idea is to hold it and reflect on God's love. The other is a cross. An object again to be held and to meditate on what it means for Christ to die for us. The challenge is to see that both of these aspects of faith are true. We are not to decide between them but understand how they each inform us about our relationship with God.

In one place C. S. Lewis presents an imaginary situation with a man and a woman walking alongside a riverbank. The man says to the woman 'I love you and I love you so much I would give my life for you'. The woman is flattered about this great statement of devotion; what greater expression of love could there be? But the man then says 'and I will show you'. With this he dives in the river and he is drowned. The woman C. S. Lewis reflects, would consider the man misguided.

But C. S. Lewis presents a second scene with a man and woman walking along by the river. The woman slips and falls into the fast flowing water. The man dives in and after a great struggle reaches her and pulls her to the bank. But he is so exhausted he slips below the water and is drowned. This time the woman considers the man to be a true hero, his love is genuine and she grieves his loss.

I sometimes wonder if the way we talk as Christians about the cross sounds rather like the

first scene. Yes, the loss of a life is very significant but the way the cross is talked about doesn't make sense, let alone help us know God's love.

What is this thing called love?

I do feel we need to rehabilitate the word love itself. It seems in many situations to be little more than a euphemism for romance or just sex. Both of course are wonderful but there is much more to love.

I think love begins with respect and a true value for a person. Whoever they are they made in the image of God.

Love is about understanding each person as they are. They are unique and to be appreciated for their history and their character.

Respect and understanding leads to action so we're prepared to help, apply our skills, give our time and be kind.

Love is going to be full of joy where our heart sings and we can face what can be tough and gruelling because we are filled with hope from a sustaining relationship..

But love is also going to require sacrifice. We will have to be courageous, live with generosity, put our own interests second and in the face of other opportunities remain faithful.

And all of this is a lifelong project because we can never truly know a person; there is always more to discover. The events of life will call us to learn more about our relationships. But even better, love will mature not only to be richer for ourselves but be an inspiration to others.

Salvation

There is a sort of shorthand that goes 'we are Christians because Jesus died for our sins and now we know the love of God'. My feeling is that its brevity makes it hard to swallow. Do we feel like we sin? Do we feel if we do sin this demands someone dies for us? And if we come to terms with being sinners and the importance of the cross is the result that we know we are deeply loved? I wonder how often we do not flourish in our faith because we are left with too many questions. It is not that there is an absence of truth here but it is too brief and leaves us unconvinced.

Supposing I said I want you to be healthy but the only thing I offered you with the accident and emergency department of the hospital? Now A&E

matters but we will have to pay attention to good food, having a first aid box at home and having instruction on crossing the road safely.

Supposing I was concerned about public order and the only thing I offered is imprisonment? Well a criminal justice system is necessary and sanctions are important too. But you have to pay attention to educating people so they act well in society. There has to be good employment so people can make their ends meet honestly. We need good role models in public life and in the media to demonstrate how to live it out in practice.

And so when we talk about the Christian faith it is about Jesus Christ and the whole of his ministry. In varied ways this shows how the love of God works. The climax of this is his death on the cross and his resurrection. But if you just take the end and call it The Gospel and demand people accept it or face God's wrath it is too brief, it is inadequate and may leave people feeling coerced or judged.

Jesus baptism

In our gospel reading Jesus said 'I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!'

Baptism is to be immersed and Jesus is saying this is what the cross will be about. He will show how he is completely identified with human experience even death. Following this he is raised to life again. He returns not with vengeance but seeking the wholeness of who he is to be available to the whole world.

When I spoke about love earlier there were so many dimensions which included respect, appreciation, action, joy but also sacrifice. It is not as if sacrifice alone makes love anymore than romance and sex do. Love is to be present in the whole of life. Sacrifice is a sure and strong foundation that prevents life all falling apart. Indeed should it fall apart there is a resource to put it all back together again.

In Romans chapter three Saint Paul says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It is the divine ambition for us to share in glory. This is not some vague intangible spirituality. It is a robust, full and loved life. When necessary sacrifice is present to guarantee its success and that we know the love of God now and forever.