

The Love of God...

A lot of words about Christian morality come out of this pulpit. And a lot more words about Christian theology and the basics of our faith. That is entirely as it should be. God has spoken to humankind and we must attend to what he says. I have heard sermons of an altogether different sort. One this week in which a pantomime parson waved his arms around and used all the rhetorical devices of the demon king at The Theatre Royal to tell us that God doesn't care what we believe. It doesn't matter, said this parson: we can be (and I quote) "of all faiths and none".

I wonder what that preacher makes of Our Lord's commandment to us to go out into the world and make all men his disciples; or even of his own ordination vows in which he promised faithfully to preach, teach and admonish in the name of Christ? Of course it matters what we believe. And true doctrine is important. It is the *believe what you like and as little as possible* policy which has all but destroyed the Church of England these last forty years. But not here. And not anywhere in those faithful congregations where people are spoken to as grown ups and the ministry of the glove puppet and the thousand and one gimmicks are unknown. There is an eleventh commandment: *Thou shalt not dumb-down the Gospel of Christ.*

But we are not literalists. Man does not live by words alone but by the bread that comes down from heaven. And when God shows us of himself and his truth he does not always confine himself to using words. Yes, I know there are a great number of verses in the Bible that begin, *And God said...* But what about this...

They bring out a young man, dead *the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And when the Lord saw her he had compassion on her and said unto her, Weep not.*

It is a pitiful scene in that Galilean village and Our Lord has the pity to match it. Did you notice - there is a moment of silence in this gospel - just a brief remark in brackets: *And they that bare him stood still.* There is all heaven and earth in that instant of stillness. Or what about this...

A youngster tormented, fallen on the ground, *wallowing, foaming. And he asked his father, How long has he been like this? And he said, From a child. And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire and into the waters to destroy him. But if thou canst do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*

And the father of the child cried out and said with tears, Lord I believe; help thou mine unbelief. And Jesus took the child by the hand and lifted him up.

And then there's this...

Blind Bartimaeus by the roadside, begging. And Jesus said, What wilt thou that I should do unto thee? The blind man said, Lord, that I might receive my sight...And he received his sight.

Or this...

And they bring unto him a woman taken in adultery... in the very act. For which the punishment was of course to be stoned to death. Now the gospels are very sparse. They don't embroider the story, as if they were novelists up for the Booker Prize. And so the remark which St John gives us next is extraordinary in all the gospels for its insight into the personality of Our Lord.

Jesus stooped down and with his finger wrote on the ground as though he heard them not. He means reverently to say Jesus was overcome by his compassion for the condemned woman. It is a scene of astonishing drama. You feel the gospel writer is holding his breath. Jesus says,

He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And they all being convicted by their own conscience went out one by one, beginning at the eldest even unto the last: And Jesus was left alone and woman standing... When Jesus had lifted up himself, he saw none but the woman. He said unto her, Woman where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?

She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more.

These are a few examples, taken more or less at random. They are not explicitly doctrinal. They are not full of thou shalt nots and the threat of divine retribution. They are little pictures simply of the divine compassion – of the love of God. The love of God for all of us. The Bible is full of such pictures, in the Old Testament as well as the New.

A few years ago I preached in the chapel at Wormwood Scrubs and I read the bit from the Psalms where a man prays out of his anguish, *Lord, put my tears in thy bottle. Write my name in thy book.* And afterwards a prisoner, a man who had murdered his wife, asked me where he could find that Psalm. He said, *To think that God has a bottle for our tears, and a book where he remembers our names...*

The Bible is not just a handbook of teaching – as if we should go to a restaurant and only read the menu. It is full of the love of God towards us in scenes from real life. And God wants to flood the world with his love, not to drown everybody save eight persons, but let us know that underneath are the everlasting arms. And the purpose of God's love is to make us loving too.

Great minds have felt the love of God and they have responded. When you hear *The St Matthew Passion* it is as if there is a great canopy of the love of God thrown over the world. And in the shelter of this canopy *O sacred head.* And we see the Son of God going to the Cross for us. A rocky landscape. The place of a skull. When we hear Mozart, *The Requiem*, we are at the bedside, we hear *Lachrymosa*: the tears of the dying, the tears of those who are left; and the tears of God. And in the crucifixion paintings by Giotto – so still and yet so moving with the divine pity. The vision of God in Dante's *Paradiso*: *of the love that moves the sun and the other stars.*

But not just the works of profound genius. The love of God bursts out in little acts by little people – like us, we hope. I was reading where Samuel Johnson is asked by Boswell whether children can give love. And Johnson said, *Sir, I knew a little girl of*

seven. And her father went to his bed oppressed by much melancholy, weeping. And his daughter went to him. She said, Father get up and put on your clothes, so I may see how you do it. Then I can do it for you when you're old.

We're meant to be like her. We are in church for teaching, for the word of God, for his commandments and laws. We are here to learn. But we are here above all to draw near to God and to know that he cares for us. And to have our hearts inflamed by his love. Love is not sentimental. Love is that power of will which seeks the good of the beloved. And to show forth his love ourselves, not only with our lips but in our lives by giving up ourselves to his service and walking before him in his love all the days of our life.

And the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said unto her, Weep not.