

*Sermon, Trinity I 2004... Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God...*

You know very well how important doctrine is. Christians have fought ferociously over an iota – the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet. Some said we should say *homousia* while others would go to the stake for *homoiousia*. The eastern and Western churches divided over the so-called Filioque clause in the Creed: should we say *proceeding from the Father and the Son* or just *proceeding from the Father*. Human beings have an almost infinite capacity for nitpicking and it is a subject for satire. You remember how Jonathan Swift has a war break out over which end to crack the egg. I had a vicar who was a stickler for getting everything absolutely right in church. He had a curate who was, shall we say, rather disorientated for space and time. One day he came in to celebrate Mass in the Lady Chapel in red – but the altar frontal was green. The Vicar was apoplectic: *Go out and get changed: you look like a parrot in a fruit shop*. The vicar was correct of course, but his attitude was hardly within the spirit of Holy Communion.

Even secular politicians fall out over minute details. I remember at university where everybody waxed extremely seriously about politics. The biggest quarrel of all was between a group called *The Revolutionary Marxist Current* and another one called *The Socialist Workers' Party*. I could never spot an iota of difference between them. But these fervent Communist sects hated each other more than they hated the Tories. And they used to deride practical politicians and members of the government for their lack of doctrinal purity. At a political meeting, one of them chided Harold Wilson for not knowing his Karl Marx thoroughly. Rudely this student blurted out: *Have you actually READ Das Kapital?* Wilson replied, *Only as far as that first footnote on page two. It's like the first fence in the Grand National – a lot fall there*. Wilson was a practical politician.

Well, we need theory, theology and doctrine to keep us straight: otherwise we could have no claim to Christian truth. But there is another sort of truth; and it is the truth of love. That is what St John is on about in this morning's Epistle. What makes Jesus so compelling is the way he gets so close to the people he meets. He enters their very being. To the man born blind *What wouldst thou that I should do unto thee?* It's a kindly joke. *Lord, that I might receive my sight*. And he says directly *Receive thy sight*. Think of how he blesses the little ones: *Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not – for such is the Kingdom of Heaven*. Or the woman caught in adultery for which the penalty according to the doctrine was stoning: *Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more*. Remember, as he is being led out to be flogged and crucified, his brief meeting with Simon Peter after Peter's denial. *And the Lord looked on Peter, and Peter remembered*. What must that look have been like? Or even to Judas *Dost thou betray the Son of Man with a kiss?* And to the penitent thief on the cross: *Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise*. And don't get me on to Mary Magdalene or else there'll be no end of blubbing.

Buddhism says you have to practise compassion *and* detachment. Jesus knew that this is impossible. He above all others practises compassion through attachment – the closest attachment you can have; the sympathetic entering into the heart and soul of the other person. To Jesus the secrets of all hearts are disclosed as soon as there is a meeting, a word, a glance, a kiss. All right then – in Mary Magdalene's case tears... not once but twice.

What then is this Christian love? It is simply that we should be like Jesus. That's all! *All you need is love?* Yes, that's right. But love isn't cloying mawkish sentimentality. Sentimentality is the deadly opposite of love, because superficially it looks like love: Satan is the perfect counterfeiter. But sentimentality isn't love. And it always ends in cruelty and indifference because it is concerned with me and my feelings and not with the real other person at all. The sentimentalist is forever observing and wallowing in his own responses instead of looking outwards towards his neighbour.

Could I say a bit about how this presents a wonderful blessing in the life of a priest – and how it is also the most terrible rebuke? The priest is privileged beyond measure because through his craft, his priest-craft, he is allowed to be close to his people at all the most significant moments in their lives. I mean, I get to hold the baby, to splash the water by which she is made *a member of Christ, a child of God and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven*. And at the wedding it is the priest who touches the couple as he ties their hands with his stole. And there is nothing more intimate than a funeral in an English churchyard. I like to use the prayer from the 1549 Prayer Book in which the priest addresses the deceased directly and so shows that we truly believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. He doesn't say, as in later books, *We commend his soul* as if *in absentia*, or like an inspector from the VAT office. He says with great tenderness: *I commend thy soul*. And supremely, at the Mass, the priest moves along the row at the altar rail and is amazingly privileged to be the one who places the sacramental life of Christ himself into your hands.

Priesthood a wonderful blessing. But a terrible rebuke whenever the priest falls short in love; when he is careless or thoughtless, casual, unfeeling, neglectful or glib. But the priest has no special virtue or goodness. The administration of the Sacraments is only – if I dare say *only* – something the priest does on behalf of everybody: *an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace*. In other words we are all called to be channels and conduits of the love of God. What we are called to do is what Christ did naturally and all the time – because love is his nature – and that is to forget self and instead install oneself imaginatively in the heart and soul of our neighbour.

When we actually achieve this even only rarely and even only a little bit, a most strange transformation occurs: we find that the self we sacrificed if only for a minute is given back to us in that loving meeting with our neighbour. And this self that we discover is our true self, because like Christ's own self, it is the self we have given away. *For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*

Of course we fall short all the time. But the teachings of Jesus, the love of Jesus, delivers to us the blinding truth that love is the only reality. As the great Dante puts it: *It is love that moves the sun and the other stars*. Or, as the old popular song said: *Love makes the world go round*. We should not fret too much when we fall short, for that very fretfulness, what is it but a lapsing back into the sin of self-obsession. You fall short and you do what that other popular song says: *Pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again*. Always remembering that our salvation is guaranteed not because we first loved Him, but because He first loved us.

And remember there is after all a proper self-love. The self you can love is that which is returned to you though your act of loving. Let Samuel Coleridge cheer us up:

*Art thou under the tyranny of sin – a slave to vicious habits – at enmity with God, and a skulking fugitive from thine own conscience? The best and most Christian-like pity thou canst show is to take pity on thine own soul. The best and most acceptable service thou canst render is to do justice and show mercy to thyself.*