

The Love of God...

... Never Runs Dry

A sermon given on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 18th May 2025, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

John 13:31-35

At the Alpha course this week, we were looking at the question of why did Jesus die on the cross? We had quite a discussion around all of that. There was a lady on my table who said, "I don't really understand why you have to make it so complicated: surely God is love, and we're just meant to love each other." In a sense, she was absolutely right: love is right there at the heart of the gospel. St. Paul says, "Though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." It's love that proves our faith is real. That's not an insight that's confined to the church by any means: people all over the world will have that instinct that love is the most important thing. In the novel and the film 'Forrest Gump', Forrest Gump is a very simple man - you might say he almost has learning difficulties. But he says, "I'm not a smart man, but I know what love is." It's not just ordinary people who think that love is the most important thing. Take the philosopher John McMurray, who said, "I am prepared to bank upon the faith that the essence of nature, both human and divine, is love." The personal life is essentially a life of relations between people and in order to be ourselves at all, we need other people. So there you are: the essence of nature, both human and divine, is love - the Beatles had it right all along: 'All you need is love.'

In this morning's gospel reading, Jesus says, *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* Except there's only one small snag, which is that love isn't always easy. When we look around the world today, we see so much evidence that love is far from natural: neighbours, people who share the same culture, engaged in bloody war against one another, not just in one place, but in several places around the world; people from the same society engaged in the most acrimonious culture wars; politically - people so divided, so polarised, that they can see not only no merit in their opponent's arguments, but they they doubt their very humanity.

So however easy it is for us to trot out the cliché of "it's important to love each other", in practice, it's really difficult. Not everyone is easy to love, and it's not easy to avoid disappointing others with our lack of love. The writer and novelist Douglas Copeland in his novel 'Life After God' has a character say this - "Here is my secret. I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray you are in a quiet room as you hear these words: my secret is that I need God; that I am sick and can no longer make it alone; I need God to help me give because I am no longer capable of giving; I need God to help me to be kind as I no longer seem capable of kindness; I need God to help me to love as I seem beyond being able to love." Love doesn't come easily.

And yet Jesus commands us to love one another, and not just with any old love. But he says, *"Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another."* It's as if the benchmark of love is to love like Jesus loved. So how was that? Well, we look at Jesus's love and we see that it was generous,

indiscriminate, almost reckless. There was no telling where the love of Jesus might land: he shows love in accepting a dinner invitation from a stuck-up member the synagogue; he shows love in showing a word of forgiveness to a lady of ill repute on the edges of society; he shows love in going to a party with a corrupt collaborator; he shows love in giving a word of assurance and healing to an officer in a hated foreign army of occupation; he shows love in making space and paying attention to children who were normally ignored; he showed love in risking his reputation, talking alone with a Samaritan woman; he showed love by extending a promise of paradise to a dying thief on a cross. Jesus's way of loving reached out to all sorts of people, many of whom were not obviously lovely. And in the end, of course, it took him to the cross.

And the context of our reading this morning is that Judas has just gone out of the room in order to betray Jesus and that's almost the trigger for Jesus to start talking about the importance of loving each other. I read all of that and I say it from this pulpit - and I am struck by the contrast with my own poor, lukewarm, carefully rationed apology for love, generally only extended to people who are quite like me.

How can we possibly love like Jesus? I think the key is to recognise the shape of his commandment - *"just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."* In other words, we need to know love before we can show it - we need to be on the receiving end of God's grace before we can expect to reflect it to those around us. In our reading from John's gospel, Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet - he's done the most lowly and menial task to display his practical love for them and then he tells them to do the same for each other. At Easter, Jesus reveals the same pattern, breathing the Holy spirit on his disciples and saying, *"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."* As the old children's chorus puts it, "Freely, freely, you have received. Freely, freely, give." - receive it and then pass it on. It's a pattern of grace, not duty - we need to know the love of God before we can show it naturally.

So let me just offer you a little picture of how that might work.

Imagine yourself standing on top of an enormous dam and you're looking down the outside face of this dam, this sheer wall of concrete blocking off the valley. At the bottom of the dam, there's a little stream trickling out - it's not very impressive; it looks like it might dry up at any moment. We think, "Well, if that's the love of the church, if that's my love, it's not going to get us very far." We look down the valley as this little stream winds its way down and all around there's a dry wilderness. We think, "Well, the ground will soon soak up that water, but the ground will be just as thirsty. - the church is pretty much irrelevant and has nothing to offer, nothing that anybody is going to notice. A bit like my love - there's not enough of it to take us very far."

But then as you stand on the top of this dam you turn around and you look the other way and you see this vast reservoir of water, this great expanse stretching away further than the eye can see - and this is the source of water feeding that unimpressive trickling little stream on the other side. It makes you realise that that little stream is never going to dry up. Not only does the reservoir feed the little stream, but it feeds all sorts of sluice gates and channels and pipes that feed a million homes with water. We realise that the love of God is like that: it's never going to dry up, no matter how feeble and ineffective and unimpressive the church's love or my love might at first see.

Because the truth is that God loves you with that endless reservoir of infinite love; He loves you not just a little bit, not just with a limited ration that you have to look after and eke out; He loves you

with all the resources of his infinite being; He made you so that he could love you like that; His desire is that you should receive his love and be warmed into fuller life by it; Out of his endless reservoir of grace, he's loving you out of your shell, out of your self-sufficiency, out of what you may feel is your unloveliness; He's loving you into a greater sense of trust and freedom, a greater security and confidence that you are loved and lovely so that you can love others in your turn - and love others in a way that more closely reflects the servant love of Jesus himself, who goes on loving all the way to the cross and out the other side.

So as we bring our emptiness, our dryness, maybe our lovelessness to the Lord's table this morning, there is this wonderful opportunity to connect with that great reservoir of grace. And as we hold out empty hands before the Lord's table today, it's as if from somewhere deep within there comes a stirring - the rusty sluice gates just open a crack; the unused turbines begin to move; water begins to flow; the trickle becomes a torrent, releasing all the pent-up energy of God's Lake of Grace - released, set free - justice and mercy rolling down in an everlasting flood.

So let us pray that the trickle might become a torrent, that we may know of God's love and so love one another - the unlovely, the hard to love, the don't know how to love. Let's remind one another that God loves each one fully, immensely, freely - that others may see the love of God is real, that it is very present, and that it can never run dry..

Reading Text

John 13:31-35

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'