

St Brandon's, Sermon for 29th April 2018
Acts 8: 26-end; 1 John 4:7-end; John 15:1-8

Let us love one another

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I found it really hard to decide what to preach on this week simply because there is so much material in the readings today that it was like having fireworks going off in my head! At one point I thought I'd opt out of choosing by preaching on the collect.

As its name suggests, the function of a collect is to collect the themes together into one summary prayer but then, in unpacking it I was still going to be taken in too many directions. However, the more I looked into the reading from 1 John, the more I became drawn into that.

This reading contains some of my favourite statements, and they form the backbone of some of our liturgies: the wedding service opens with the statement '*God is love, and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them*'.

In the context of a marriage, it is a powerful point of entry both for the couple to identify their love for each other as God-given and God-like, but also, I often hope, as an invitation to see and understand the nature of God through knowing – being immersed in – the experience of loving another.

In other words, where the couple had declared themselves to be active Christians, it would be a natural extension to include God in their loving of each other and for them to attribute their love to God and give thanks to God for giving them each other. However, you don't have to be a believer to be married in

church: anyone of any persuasion has the right to be married in their parish church.

It would be unusual to want to if God was a real anathema to either the bride or groom but sometimes I get the impression that they feel God is a bit superfluous to their requirements, not unwelcome but not intentionally on their guest list.

In that case, I have appealed in my heart, and sometimes in my sermon, that being in love might alert them to what it is like and means to know and be known by God.

Now this is bad theology according to 1 John because I am being tempted to reverse the whole thrust of the passage which is, that it is those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God that know God.

Well, I'm not going to stop my sloppy practise because I'm all for a low threshold, and wide doorways when it comes to drawing people's attention to the possibility that God is in their lives and looking for them to make a response.

I want the invitation to hear the good news that they are loved, and invited to participate in that saving divine love, to be heard somehow or other if it possibly can.

There is always time for more mature theology and reflection if, and as, they grow in the faith.

It is also because I believe that true knowledge of God can only be experienced, it cannot be an entirely cerebral matter: we could be intellectually convinced of the truth of Christ by the scriptures and writings of theologians but we cannot have a living faith without knowing God through the Spirit, the Spirit being alive in us.

The Spirit praying within us.

The Spirit allows us to experience God as love, it allows that entirely non-intellectual knowledge of God that makes fully known the truth of the intellectual acceptance.

Intellectually we can learn and sign up to the fact that Jesus lived, died and rose again and did so as the declared Son of God, to save the world.

We can follow complex arguments about how this might be, how the symbolism and scriptures are worked through.

Yet none of this will impact beyond our intellects if we do not *experience* the reality of God at work in us and our world through his Spirit, the huge driving force of love which overcomes evil; light which overcomes darkness.

Just as some people might start from knowing of and about Jesus through the story of scripture and then come second to experiencing and naming the living God, I think it can also work the opposite way around.

So I would always want to start with the goal posts so wide as to say that all who recognise the power of love to drive out fear, the power of good over evil, and a sense that there is a huge force of ultimate love at the centre, holding everything together, anyone who recognises those things is recognising the love of God whether or not they are naming it as that.

Anyone who knows the redeeming power of love from another to make them feel a bigger, better, more alive and more loving person themselves, is well disposed to understanding the possibility that the source and well-spring of that is available in God.

As we increasingly lose the traditional ways in which people in this country would have learnt the scripture stories through school, home and an expectation that most people would go to church and Sunday school, so the likelihood of the first route into the Christian faith has maybe got less likely. (It is also why its is vitally important that we put so much effort into keeping the Sunday School and Messy Church thriving).

If the 'knowing the story' route is less likely to happen automatically, we need to look for opportunities to make that story known.

We need opportunities for the many, many people who know the power of love in their lives to see and hear how that connects to the faith story, and learn from the starting point of experience, about the origin and endless promise of love from God.

We can do that through the welcome we offer to those seeking baptisms and weddings, coming for funerals.

We can do it through the welcome we offer to those who wander into the church during the week as visitors and tourists.

We can do those things intentionally as a church, together.

Individually we can do it through the welcome to someone walking a dog in the churchyard, living close by, working with us.

Not as heavy evangelism but as quiet, loving presence, letting it be known that we place our trust in God and are steadfast in his love: risking letting that be shared and shown to others, as Fiona was saying last week.

Letting those good desires the Spirit puts into our minds lead us to action, praying that we might bring them to good effect – and read again the way the Spirit moved Philip to being in the right place to say the things to the eunuch that led him to belief and

baptism, and, tradition has it, to going on to found the church in Ethiopia!

There is a third way people might be drawn into the faith community, and into faith, which is by initially feeling a sense of belonging in the faith community.

This may be an increasingly strong route in, as society seems to be moving more and more to wanting to be 'connected' as 'community': on facebook and face to face, and to know roots: family trees, a sense of past, a need for secure roots.

In addition to welcome, good nurture and teaching/learning is needed if they are to come to faith and know God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the true root, the true vine, and themselves as the true branches.

Acknowledging that no-one is ever too 'new' to 'belong' and showing that in our proper inclusion of all: this place exists for and belongs to those who are 'out there'; we are pretty good at being stewards, not owners, but we can trip up.

Community and belonging is a good point at which to go back into the 1 John passage and look closer at what this gorgeous and giddy passage is saying, and why?

Most academics think the Gospel of John and this letter are written by the same person, and that the letter was written to address a community in crisis.

It could have been that some members of their Christian community rejected the right confession of Jesus, became heretics and split off to form another group, and that posed a threat to the confidence and stability of the community.

If you read the letter in its entirety, you will find the passages we hear on three consecutive Sundays are interspersed with cautions and rants against those who do not love and are akin to the devil.

As we don't know the circumstances John was writing about we cannot properly assess the negative passages and they are unhelpful out of context.

The letter as a whole is an impassioned and inspired exhortation to keep to the true faith and we can draw on it today. John is emphasising the primacy of God's love, and the Son of God as the inseparable relationship of Father and Son.

Our love of God, personally and historically as 'people of God', is fallible, we are incapable of being consistent and faithful.

Thankfully, it is not dependant on our love of God:

'In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins'.

It is the faithful love of God, expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for us, that saves us.

So recognising the indwelling love of God for us is inseparable from the right confession, that Jesus is the Son of God.

It is not sufficient though to only recognise God's love in the saving work of Jesus.

God's love for us cannot be claimed independently of love for brother and sister: we must have love for one another as the visible fruit and outworking of this experience of God, knowing his loving Spirit to be at work in us.

'We love because he first loved us'.

Like a stream of living water it must pour **through** us if it is to keep pouring; it must **overflow** from us if we continue to receive.

We can picture this as a flow from and between Father and Son; from and between self and God (as Father and Son); from and between self and others.

And this flow is experienced as love, and is generated by and via the Holy Spirit that we invite to abide – live - in us every time we confess that Jesus is the Son of God.

Sunday by Sunday we make that confession together to bring us back from our week of wandering and muddle to the place where God abides in us.

Firmly resolved to try once more to live in love and peace with others, as we confirm again our belief in the unseen God, made visible in our lives through Son and Holy Spirit.

So I invite you to stand and make that confession of faith once more, together: