

*Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I had lost ... There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth*

*All of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility*

*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.<sup>1</sup>*

These first 5 weeks of Trinity Season take us on a journey. We set out together on a pilgrimage where we never arrive but the destination has an infinite capacity to delight and to give more. On Trinity Sunday a door is open in heaven, and we are invited to gaze on the over-flowing love of God, to know God as a Trinity of love: **‘the one infinite and changeless act of being that makes all else actual, ... purely positive, sufficient in itself ... fully vital and creative...feasting and fellowship, perfect delight and perfect rest’<sup>2</sup>** ‘limitless love sweeping us into itself’.<sup>3</sup>

We are not just invited to gaze upon the love of God, but to dwell in this love, to inhabit this love, and to manifest it as the principle of our lives.

Very quickly we recognize that this is no ordinary love and no ordinary journey. This love is not a feeling, we know that because it comes with a commandment- ‘and this commandment we have from him, that he that loveth God, love his brother also’. To choose this love is to enter into the goodwill of God toward all people. To love in this way is to will with God, that all be saved, found, brought home. This love is not a feeling, though we hope that our feelings will follow along in the path blazed by the consuming fire, that we will with the angels delight in the joy of heaven put before us in the Gospel today (There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth, feasting and fellowship, perfect delight and perfect rest). To love in this way is to want with our settled choice and knowledge, however imperfect, what God wills with perfect freedom and knowledge.

There is a lot at stake in what we will, in what we love. There is a lot at stake in what we could refuse to will, or to love. To reject the commandment to love with God’s love is to put ourselves in peril – ‘He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer.’ With so much at stake, to set out on this journey requires courage. The humility to which we are called today is not a low crawling thing. To embrace this humility is to stand in a right relation with God and with neighbour. To embrace this humility is to stand fast, having put on the armour of God, to stand fast in the battle with our adversary, the false accuser and the father of lies, who prowls about like a roaring lion.

If we are looking ahead on this journey, we will know that the road is set to become even more steep, even more challenging. Next week, our Lord will exhort us: ‘Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven’.<sup>4</sup> Then, we return to hear St Peter explain what this means: ‘Love as brethren

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<sup>1</sup> Trinity 1, Epistle, 1 John 4.7 ff.

<sup>2</sup> David Bentley Hart, *Doors of the Sea*, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> p. 81 *Doors of the Sea*.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6.36-37

... not rendering evil for evil ... but contrariwise blessing'.<sup>5</sup> No wonder the same St Peter throws himself down before the Lord and says, *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man O Lord.*

Some of you have heard me describe this love as relentless. We love, and we hope to love more freely and fully, because God first loved us. God who comes to us in love does not relent, he searches us out, finds us and brings us home. the Good Shepherd of our souls does not stop there, he goes down to the depths of hell, and to the depths of our hearts, over-turning what is false, to cleanse and restore his image in us. God in his love does not relent. Will we seek to walk toward this love and into this love? We say last week that there are many ways to turn down the invitation to the feast. God's love is a consuming fire. To walk into this love is to have all this is not love burned away – Thanks be to God.

Integral to this journey into the divine love is St Peter's confession to which we come at the end of this first part of our journey in a fortnight: *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man O Lord.* St Peter's confession is not a statement of despair, because he makes it turned toward the Lord Jesus. You cannot both give up hope and give oneself into the hands of divine hope. It is more a statement of accounting, a statement of the obvious – St Peter doesn't have what he needs to love fruitfully with the divine love, he does not have what it takes to bring the fish alive into the boat, into the ark of Christ's Church. This confession is the beginning of his journey with the Lord, not the end. Each of us is invited to find our way to this same place, to confess our insufficiency, so that Christ may be sufficient in us.

When I first began to prepare for this sermon, I thought that the readings for today were those of last week: 'And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.' At the same time, I was reading the Church of England report *Living in Love and Faith: Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage*. The book is described as a part of the Living in Love and Faith project:

'The book takes readers on a journey that begins with reflections on God's gifts of life, relationships, marriage and learning. A survey of what is happening in the world with regard to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage is followed by an exploration of how Christians are to understand and respond to these trends in the light of the good news of Jesus Christ.'

Asking myself how the commandment to believe God and love one another might inform the *Living in Love and Faith* project, I discovered a catholic theologian and psychiatrist who put the question in precisely those terms. Jack Dominion argued that:

the 'essential and central truth' of Christianity is that 'the law of Christ is based on the commandment of loving one's neighbour... Any teaching of Christianity relevant to interpersonal behaviour must ... be permeated by love, and reducible to terms comprehensible and intelligent to the essence of love'.<sup>6</sup>

So far so good. He continues: 'The traditional Christian definition of love is wishing and doing good to one another'. Or, in St John's words from last week, 'My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed, and in truth.'

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Pet. 3.8-9

<sup>6</sup> *Christian Marriage*, J. Dominion, 1967, Darton, Longman, and Todd, p. 157

For the young Jack Dominion, the language of sex is the language of a complete gift of oneself to the other:

‘in Christian terms there is an encounter between two people whose life must be an expression of their state as neighbours in Christ. The sexual act within marriage is an expression of the desire, hope and intention to belong totally to the other for better or worse. It is the seal of a love that is prepared to be concerned exclusively with the other’s welfare and to love the other with the same concern that one loves oneself.’

He concludes, after filling this out, that a ‘union of bodies in the absence of a real union of minds and hearts’, for him, a union of bodies outside of marriage, is likely to lead to ‘mutual use’ or a kind of exploitation,<sup>7</sup> the likelihood of ‘rejection’, and the absence of the ‘total commitment’<sup>8</sup> which belongs to the reality and promise of union.

Well, one could respond, marriage as we know it in practice may have all these dangers also, so how helpful is this ideal? Indeed, his own awareness of how hard it is to love one another led Dominion in his 25 years of working for the NHS to seek to provide resources to help couples strengthen relationships. This same work led him to modify some of the views described here. On the one hand, the early Dominion states classic Christian teaching, and he does so trying to think together the union of bodies with the union of lives according to ‘terms comprehensible and intelligent to the essence of love’. He tries explicitly to speak of marriage in the terms with which St John sends us on the journey into the divine love: ‘And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.’

But how does one make sense of this approach, which for many has the weight of the scriptural witness and tradition behind it, when so many of the principles and the presuppositions which shape our culture, the principles which shape our thinking even before we even begin to think, say something else? Are we being led to a new understanding of the depths of love, or are we being led away from home, to some form of lostness? Well, it was at this point, chewing on the difficult task of how to speak about all of this, wondering whether or not it made sense even to try in a sermon, and wondering how much the living in Love and Faith project would promote love and faith, it was at this point of some struggle, that I realized I was planning a sermon based on the wrong readings.

Perhaps the bigger question you might be asking is why I’m sharing this with you? Could I simply not come up with something to say about the readings for this Sunday? I’m sharing all of this with you because being stopped short before the relentless searching of the divine love is what the epistle and Gospel set for today are meant to do. My confusion reveals something important about the journey into the love of God.

The most challenging and emotionally charged debates in the life of the Church, or probably any kind of arguments at all, are also the ones where we are most tempted to adopt an attitude of righteous indignation toward those who disagree with us. When something is very important to us, we struggle with the temptation to sneer and look down. In saying that, I am not arguing that we should embrace what sometimes gets called ‘good disagreement’. At is worse, this could endorse an idea the truth which saves us or sets us free is a question of opinion—not much of a key to set us free. Of course, there

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<sup>7</sup> ‘a mutual use and exploitation, a failure to be fully human’, p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> p 157.

are better ways to think about good disagreement. But at precisely this point in the journey into love we are faced with a warning, a warning about a wrong turn which will lead us away from our destination, a dead end.

***Then drew near unto him all the Publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and Scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.***

The great sinners of the day, those who are in some ways lost, lost to themselves, cut off from their neighbours, wandering away from home, are drawn to hear the Lord Jesus. They are drawn to him as the physician of their souls who shows them the way home. The scribes and Pharisees are offended.

In a wonderful sermon on the Gospel for today, Gregory the Great makes the incisive point: ‘... the pharisees ... were scornful of [Christ]. You should conclude from this that true righteousness has compassion, but false righteousness scorn’. ‘Those who are used to feeling proud because of their false righteousness look down on every one else. They show no mercy to the weak, and they become worse sinners to the extent that they believe they are not sinners.’ This is the fault of the Pharisees, who ‘were so sick that they did not know that they were sick’. To them, and to us, our Lord offers ‘soothing lotions’.<sup>9</sup> It is possible to be righteous in love, and to correct a sinner out of concern and love for them. But the parable warns us that it is all too easy to be confused about this, to seek righteousness without compassion.

As healing lotion, the Lord offers to the Pharisees and to us three parables of the lost being found, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, the Prodigal son (Prodigal son is the longest and which follows on from the gospel for today inviting us to hear it in not hearing it).

For Gregory, the woman is a symbol of the Wisdom of God. Others see in this woman Mother Church, or the Divine Word which makes manifest the things where are hidden.<sup>10</sup> The lost coin is a picture of the human soul, stamped ‘with a royal image and likeness, that, namely, of the Most High God’<sup>11</sup> ‘The woman lights a lamp because God’s wisdom appeared in a human nature. A lamp is light in a clay vessel, and light in a clay vessel is divinity in a human body’.<sup>12</sup> In the first parable, the shoulders on which the Shepherd carries the sheep are the arms of his cross,<sup>13</sup> in this parable, the clay vessel made firm in the fire is the body of Christ fired in the agony of the passion and the glory of the resurrection.<sup>14</sup>

What is meant to heal the pharisees and which is offered for the healing of our souls is not a stern rebuke. Rather, we are invited to be transformed by the key note of rejoicing. Like last week, it is the joy of the feast which is meant to change us.

I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth,

There is joy in the presence of the angels of God

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<sup>9</sup> Gregory, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, Cistercian Studies Series 123, Homily 34, p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Catena*, Toal, vol 3, 194

<sup>11</sup> Cyril Alexandria, *Catena Aurea*, Toal, vol 3, p 198

<sup>12</sup> Gregory, *Forty Homilies*, p. 284

<sup>13</sup> Ambrose, in *Toal*, p 195

<sup>14</sup> Gregory, *Forty Homilies*, p. 284.

Standing in this joy, we are invited to see things anew, from within the divine love which goes out without ceasing to look for all far away from home, to find them, and to carry them home.

Why more joy over the one than the 99? There are many things to say here, but basically, the 99 who need no repentance may speak of the angels of God whose wills are already fixed in divine love and wisdom, but the 99 does not speak of us.

The humility which we are asked to put on is not a denial of God's gifts in us or in another. This humility is not a denial of the light of God. But all the saints who see themselves in the light of Christ know their need to be brought home and forgiven.

On the journey into the divine love, we cannot put behind us the danger that we will write off our brothers or sisters in Christ. It is easy to love in principle, it is much harder to be sent down from the heights of seeing the principle to love in practice, in all the challenges and opportunities of each day. We will go out and try again. First, let us come to feast, let us come to feed on the word and wisdom of God, and let us give thanks that we come together, each of us in need of divine touch and healing in different ways. Let us pray that the divine love will continue to search us out and find us, and to bring us home, all together to rejoice with the angels of heaven.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Even if we find ourselves on the side of an argument which has the weight of truth and wisdom, we can nonetheless fail to show the same love which we find in Christ and which we are exhorted to imitate. We love because he first loved us.

Governing all three parables is the note of joy or rejoicing which follows each finding. We are invited to stand in this place of rejoicing for the one who is lost and brought home.

Typical of the commentators of the early Church, Gregory thought that the terms in which our Lord offers the parables invites to a symbolic interpretation.

Again, when the coin is found, we are again invited to a festival of rejoicing, 'Who are her friends and neighbours unless they are the heavenly powers mentioned above?'<sup>15</sup> I was not going to mention again that for Gregory the 100 sheep are the total number of rational beings created to see God, and the one sheep is humanity which has gone astray by leaving the pasture of life. Then when I discovered that for Ambrose and Augustine also, and for Cyril of Alexandria, the 99 sheep left behind were the thousands upon thousands of the orders of angels who minister to God and surround his throne, this seemed more significant. Perhaps if we appreciate the fulness of the choir rejoicing with the Father and the Son, and in the bond of Love, the Holy Spirit, perhaps then we grasp something more of the relentless character of the love which pursues the lost sheep, hunts for the image tarnished and soiled, and goes out to meet the lost Son and daughter.

The epistle has the same kind of warning as the Gospel, but put more starkly: be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time; casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour

The lion devours in a two-fold way – he devours as the false accuser, who stirs up scorn and contempt for those who appear to be lost in lostness, not worthy of attention or joy. The humility which we are asked to put on is not a denial of God's gifts in us or in another, it is not a denial of the light of God.

At the same time, the great saints are also those who have the most acute sense of their unworthiness to look down on another. St Paul discerns, but he does so as one who knows that he denied Christ and persecuted his brothers and sisters in Christ.

The note of joy shapes our love, gives us a glimpse of the depth of God's love, stirs up our zeal to see all brought, warns of great danger of pride, and points instead to the joy of heaven.

