

Trinity 9, July 28th 2024

6.00pm. Holy Communion with healing prayer

Ephesians 3.14-21, John 6.16-21

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

I guess if I were to ask which is the most well-known verse in the bible, John 3.16 would be high up on the list of answers.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Or in what is probably a better translation

God loved the world in this way- he gave us his only Son...

And that is the core message of all the gospels – that the love of God is shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, for each one of us, And to what end? So that we may have eternal life. In the gospels we see this love being expressed mainly on a human level through a very human Jesus showing compassion to others, forgiving them and teaching them. Even the majority of Jesus' miracles were mainly human focussed – healing individuals, restoring sight to the blind and making the lame walk. But there are hints in the gospels of something beyond the human Jesus, particularly in the gospel of John – the changing of water into wine and the feeding of the 5000, where Jesus shows his love and compassion for those around through the supernatural provision of food, and tonight's gospel of Jesus walking on the water, where he demonstrates his concern for his friends in their struggles against the wind and the rain. In these miracles the veil is drawn aside, and we see things beyond our normal understanding, beyond the physical confines of the world - events that perhaps give us a glimpse of the eternity that God's love promises us. And of course, the love of God is expressed chiefly through the miracle of the resurrection, where heaven breaks through to earth, where the veil is not simply drawn aside but ripped from top to bottom. Many years after the gospel events, John was able to write in one of his letters

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.

Stephen reminded us last week, that most of the miracles of Jesus get little mention in the later parts of the New Testament and the concentration is on this greatest of all miracles – the death and resurrection of Jesus. And so it is in the letter of Paul to the Ephesians. There Paul tries to set out where his thinking and prayer have led him in understanding the love of God. He begins in the earlier chapters with that greatest miracle of them all, the resurrection, and how that means that each one of us can be forgiven, be reconciled with God, to find fulfilment in his presence. But his goes much broader and sees the love of God as shown in the death and resurrection of the Lord as the source of reconciliation

between people and societies – in his case the Jews and the Gentiles, the reconciliation of the spiritual powers and authorities to God and ultimately the restoration of all creation. The love of God painted on a very large canvas. And in our epistle reading tonight he prays that God's people might understand something of the extent of the love that achieves this. He prays

that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love, that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

The breadth of the love of God that encompasses us, all those around us, all those in our country, all in the world, but extends to all of his creation; the length of God's love that extends throughout time transforming our past and our future; the height of God's love that will ultimately bring us into his presence in heaven; and the depths of God's love that reaches down to us in our darkest places. And for us in our modern scientific age, this prayer has an even more extensive reach – that the love of God extends beyond this world into the immensity of a creation that Paul could not conceive, over time scales that were for him, as they are for us, totally incomprehensible. But yet Paul prays that we may each know something of this love.

But how – this seems just too much for us to take in? And indeed, it is. Even to talk of God's love for us and the world is to use the human term of love, that as expressive as it is, cannot possibly capture the full meaning of what Paul was vaguely comprehending. So inevitably we are drawn back to what we can just about understand when thinking about the love of God. For Paul and the gospel writers this was of course the passion and resurrection of Jesus, and it remains so for us.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.

Some would interpret our reading from Ephesians in terms of the cross – the upright showing the love of God reaching down to the depths and up to the heavens, and the cross beam showing the love of God encompassing the whole world. A bit fanciful perhaps, but I rather like the idea.

But God has spoken to others down the centuries, on the same quest of understanding, using other images, and I include one of them in Worship for the Week – the vision of a Mother Julian of Norwich of a hazelnut, which I guess many of you will know. Whilst I wouldn't put this on a par with scripture by any means, it does I think speak powerfully of God's love. She writes

And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God. In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.

And it is there I want to end. As we pray that we might know “*the breadth and length and height and depth, and the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*” so perhaps we might keep that image of Mother Julian in our mind and realise that all that is, was made by God, loved by God and kept by God, and that we and all whom we care and pray for, are similarly made by God, loved by God, and kept by God, now and for all eternity. And nothing can separate us from that love.