

Fourth Sunday of Lent – 10 March 2024

Message – Love and Grace (endless)

Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life, revealed to us through the lifting up of the Eternal Word, open our hearts and minds, ears and eyes, to your light, love, and grace.

Amen.

Last week we were reflecting on the law, God's law, an expression of love, given ultimate expression through love. This week we reflect on the nature of God's love, love invincible and unending for all the cosmos:

For this is how God loved the cosmos: God gave their one and only child, so that everyone who believes in the Word will not perish but have eternal life.

Yes, I do wish the Bible was more inclusive; our language can limit our understanding of God; it is only ever a partial description of revelation through the Eternal Word.

Our reading from John's gospel starts in an odd place. Though debated, the start, '*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent...*' is more probably the end of Jesus's response to Nicodemus's lack of faith and understanding. We may choose to dismiss the '*And*' so that we may see the example of Moses lifting up the serpent as a part of today's passage but it seems better to consider it as at least a linking image.

Nicodemus had seen Jesus's miracles and recognised the Divine authority of the Eternal Word but Nicodemus lacked any deeper belief in Jesus's message. Though a spiritual

leader, he could not make the leap that would allow him to understand that we are born of water and spirit.

Nicodemus would have known well the story of Moses lifting up the serpent. It's a story of God's grace. Through looking on the serpent God gave, physical, new life to those who had been bitten. Nicodemus was being invited to look upon the life of Christ and to have new life, this time new life in all its fullness, including life in the age to come.

We perhaps wonder why God told Moses to create a graven image; it was not to be worshiped as a god. It was to be a reminder of God's power to save. The Canaanites had a cult that worshiped a snake as a source of healing. The account of Numbers gives new meaning to that snake, it sets it in a different story, one that expresses the grace of the God of love. Thankfully, we do not always get what we deserve. God's love is without limit other than not removing our freewill. God longs to express that love for us.

The lifting up of the snake, beyond the giving of new life, is very obviously a reference to Christ's crucifixion. At the time of their conversation Nicodemus could not possibly have understood this, yet, perhaps the light dawned at the crucifixion and as he helped with Christ's burial.

John's gospel sees Christ's crucifixion in a different light from the other gospels. Where the synoptics see Christ's crucifixion as some kind of defeat, a low point in the account of God's expression of love through the Eternal Word, John sees the crucifixion as a lifting up, a glorifying of the Eternal Word. In John's gospel, we repeatedly have a

double lifting up, lifting up on the cross and lifting up to heaven, both of which are seen as glorifying God.

We believe that God is revealed through Christ. Christ's crucifixion was not some failed part of the plan; it was the plan; it is, a part of, the expression of God's love for the cosmos, for all creation. The crucifixion speaks of God's love for all creation; a sacrificial love that keeps on giving.

John's gospel more than any other portrays that nature of God's love. It is John who recounts Jesus washing of the disciples' feet, an act unthinkable for someone who was considered a revered teacher at the very least and certainly not what the disciples expected in their growing understanding of who Christ was.

For all of us, if we are to be in the image of Christ, it raises the uncomfortable reality that we are to love and keep on loving, even those who seem impossible to love. It is not easy and knowing what truly express love requires wisdom that is beyond most of us.

We will all act on the basis of the knowledge that we have and at times get it terribly wrong. Sometimes, we will have the chance to apologise and even make amends. Sometimes, we will not and we may not even know the harm we have done. We hope that the love we are trying to express will be offered to us as well and that we may be forgiven.

At this point it is worth reflecting on our reading from the letter to the Ephesians probably not written by Paul! The scholastic jury is still out but the changes in theology, emphasis, and language, point either to Paul undergoing a rapid transformation or a pseudo-graphic author.

Nonetheless, the letter articulates the developing thought of the early church, *'by grace [we] have been saved'*. We are *'saved through faith'* and it is not of our own doing, it is God's gift to us, an expression of love and mercy. And, in case we have not got the message, it is *'not the result works'*: our good deeds no matter how many there are, cannot save us. In fact, God has even lain the path there for us. We are created for good works which *'God has prepared beforehand to be our way of life.'*

None of us get it right all the time. To use John's imagery, none of us manage to walk in the light all the time. Our faith journey is to bring more of our lives into the light. Where are the shadows in our lives and what is creating them?

Are there things in our lives which, like the bronze serpent, were once an aid to faith but which have lost their real meaning and purpose? We are in a season of self-examination. Perhaps this week you can find time to reflect on your own spiritual practices:

- what is building you up and drawing you closer to God?
- what is no longer bearing fruit?
- what areas of your spiritual life need new nourishment?

We must each take responsibility for our own journey with God, hopefully following the path that God has prepared though, as Thomas Merton expresses, we may know nothing of it. Thankfully, just as we do unintentional harm, we also do good, which we may never know of. God is at work in and through us.

The grace of the God who loves us unconditionally is what saves us. With the revelation that we need saving also comes the possibility that we might not be saved. There are heated debates about whether God saves everyone, universalism, or God saves only those who believe in Christ, particularism. I can see both sides of the argument.

We have confidence in God's saving power. We are called to share the message of God's love. All we can do is express God's love as best we can. We can never know all that is affecting others and sometimes what will help one person will also hurt another person; life is complicated and it is certainly not the case that everyone hears the gospel.

As we perceive the complexity of life, we recognise that simple categorical answers rarely contain the whole truth. We hope we are '*those who do what is true [who] come to the light*'. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear our deeds, imperfect and faltering as they are will, by God's grace, be seen to have been done in God.

At times, we hurt and wound, we are after all a community of forgiven sinners, we are not perfect. But, together, we can bring healing and wholeness, if we echo the love that God has for us, as best we can, forgiving others as we have been forgiven not because we deserve it but because God loves us and all creation.

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, Courage to change the things we can, and Wisdom to know the difference. Amen. Amen.