

*St. Aidan's West Epping, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2020*

**“RELATIONSHIPS: GOD, US AND OUR NEIGHBOUR”**

**(Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Psalm 40:1-14; Philippians 2:1-11; John 1:29-42)**

**God is love!** Famous words from the First Letter of John which take us right to the heart of who God is. John doesn't simply write that God is a loving God. He says something even more profound: not just about the character of God, but about his very reality. Yes, God **is** love!

In this series of sermons that Ross is calling “Out!”, encouraging us to think about how we live and how we bear witness **out** in the world, our focus today is on **relationships**, and the way we connect with God and also with other people.

The Bible introduces us to God as the Creator of everything. God is unique. But in that famous account of creation in Genesis Chapter 1, we find God saying: “Let **us** make humankind in our image.” Is he simply using the royal plural? Or is there someone helping him – perhaps some powerful angels? Or is there something else being hinted at here?

As the account continues, we are told that God created human beings in his image: male and female he created them. It seems that being in the image of God involves more than just being an individual human being: **humans in relationship** somehow display the image of God. The writer of Genesis seems to be suggesting that there is relationship in the very **we** reading of God.

However the main emphasis in the Old Testament is on **the unity and the uniqueness of the Lord God**. As our reading from Deuteronomy tells us, the Lord alone is God. Other people may have their gods, but they are of no significance. **There is only one God**. And what he seeks from his people is not simply worship or obedience or faithfulness – though these are all fundamental as a response to the Lord.

What the Lord seeks is **love**: and not a vague love, a token love. The Lord calls his people to love him **with all their heart and all their soul and all their strength**. He calls his people to love him with their whole being. Jewish people are still familiar with these words today, and many devout Jews recite them every day, just as some Jews still wear little containers with these words when they pray, and some even place these words at their front door, taking fairly literally these words of Moses. We too are familiar with the words because Jesus endorses them in his teaching: as Jesus' followers **we** are to love the Lord our God with all our being.

And part of that love involves **loving our neighbour as ourselves**, as Moses says in the book of Leviticus, words echoed by Jesus in the Gospels. Our **obedience** to God and his commandments demonstrates the **reality of our love** for God. And behind all this is God's love for his people, whom he rescued from captivity in Egypt and called to himself.

We might also notice the emphasis on parents teaching their children, and on God's people talking and being open about their commitment to the Lord. In the Old Testament, what people call “religion” is not simply a private matter, as we are so often encouraged to think in today's world.

The Psalmist in **Psalm 40**, which we said this morning, certainly didn't think it was. He wanted **others** to know what the Lord had done for him. He didn't just have a new appreciation of God in his **heart**: he had a new song in his **mouth**. He had not kept his story to himself: he had spoken even to the great congregation of God's goodness. He wanted his neighbours to know about the goodness of the Lord. More than that, he also knew that sacrifices and offerings were not the most important response to God: what mattered most of all was **obedience** to God's call.

As we continue to think about who God is, we come to the New Testament, where things hinted at in the Old Testament get spelt out in a new way. The starting point is still that **there is one God, and that God is one**. The Jewish faith still holds on to that truth. The Moslem faith holds on to it particularly strongly, and indeed rejects the Christian Trinitarian understanding of God. Of course, in most places in the centuries before Jesus as well as in some parts of the world today, people believed in many gods. But as Christians we still hold onto the Biblical message that **God is one God**.

But the opening words of John's Gospel point us to a new and clearer and deeper understanding of God. “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God... And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The God who is the Creator, the God who is Love, entered his creation, coming into this world as a **genuine human being**.

In our reading from **Philippians 2**, Paul seems to be quoting an early Christian hymn. Within probably three decades of Jesus' death and resurrection, Christians were singing these wonderful words of praise about Jesus. **Jesus is God in his very being**, we read: as we now say, he is **God the Son**. But instead of clinging to the wonderful glory he rightly had or using his power for his own purposes, he put that glory aside.

The human race, so loved by God despite our frailty and sin, needed divine help. And so God the Son laid aside his glory in order to become a human being: he came into the world not simply to serve the **divine purpose**, but in fact to serve **us**. **The Creator became our servant**, to the point of great suffering and a terrible death. God is love, and that is what love required.

As we know of course, the death of Jesus was far from being the end of the story. Jesus rose, triumphant over death, and ascended to his rightful place at his Father's right hand.

And as Paul tells us, Jesus has rightly been highly exalted, so that at the name of Jesus, **every** knee should bend. All creation should acknowledge him. Why bend the knee before Jesus? Why should everyone confess his name? Because he is indeed **Lord of all**. And this is to the **glory** of God the Father. Jesus' Lordship is not in competition with God the Father's: it is an expression of the shared love at the very heart of God's being.

God is love. God **acts** in love. God even serves in love. Jesus demonstrated this love by becoming one of us. He showed us what the God who is love is like, and he sets the pattern of life for all of us who follow him.

Of course, behind all this is the reality of the Trinity. The unity of God involves relationship: the Father, the Son and also the Holy Spirit. God is One, but he reveals himself and fulfils his purpose and relates in three ways. Christians describe him as three persons and one God.

As people made in God's image, we are made for love, we are to be people who love. When Paul wrote down this great hymn to the Lord Jesus, he wanted to make an important point. **Jesus sets the loving pattern for our lives and relationships**. This is the way it should be in the life of the church.

Paul tells the Philippians: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

I don't think Paul was telling his readers to put themselves down, let alone regard themselves as worthless – as some people mistakenly think humility is all about. We are still made in the image of God, even if the image is tarnished. We are still loved and valued by God. We don't need to put ourselves down, but we **are** to value and to love others, so that **our** desires and agendas do not get in the way of us treating other people with love.

There is a song made famous in the 80's by Whitney Houston called "The Greatest Love of All". I gather she had been let down by people whose love she needed, and the message of the song was that we need to teach our children to love themselves, to value themselves and not to allow others to put them down. To love yourself is "the greatest love of all", she sang.

Yes, it is important to help our children to have a healthy and realistic self-esteem. But the central message of the song, that self-love is the **greatest** love of all, is what I would call "fake news".

The greatest love of all is, of course, God's love for us, shown in Jesus Christ. The great challenge is for us to reflect something of that love in our lives and relationships. And of course, if everyone did that, people would be treating and relating to each other in a way which would help us all to have that healthy form of self-esteem, which puts us in a much better position to relate to each other in love.

It is **normal** for humans to love ourselves; it is normal to care for ourselves. It is sad when a person thinks they are unloved and unlovable. It is not what God wants for us. But what matters is that **we love God and that we love our neighbour**.

So let us be people who seek to consistently show love in our lives and relationships. And as the Psalmist reminded us, part of that is openly acknowledging the love of God, and pointing **others** to that love, so that they too might open up to his love for them. In our Gospel reading, Andrew met Jesus and quickly came to recognize him as the promised Messiah. What did he do? He got his brother Peter and introduced him to Jesus.

We were made for relationships by the God who is love. May we then live our lives knowing that God loves us, and knowing that Jesus the Lord himself shared our life and died and rose for us.

And therefore, whether we are at home or in our neighbourhood, or out in the world that God loves, may we look for opportunities to show the love of God in our deeds **and** our words, that others might come to know the love of God for us all. Amen.

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