A Sermon preached by the Revd John Witheridge at Matins on Sunday 30 July 2017

Christian Love

I

We heard in today’s O.T. reading a very remarkable, unexpected, not to say, shocking, piece of poetry:

‘As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens. As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me! My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.’

I’m not sure that the translation conveys it, but this is beautiful Hebrew, befitting a sublime love poem. I expect you could hear Henry Purcell’s enchanting anthem in the lines, ‘My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone’. It’s a pity the choir’s not here this morning to sing it.

The Song of Solomon, or The Song of Songs, is a celebration of sexual love. It’s not exactly the Kama Sutra, but the lovers’ erotic encounters in the poem are not shy of intimacy, yearning and desire. Not surprisingly, the Christian Church has justified this book’s inclusion in the Scriptures
on the grounds that it’s not really about sex, but is an allegory of Christ and his ‘bride’, the Church.

Our N.T. reading from the first letter of Peter talks about a very different kind of love. This one, he says, ‘covers a multitude of sins.’ That’s to say, it’s a love that removes or atones for sin. The sexual love in the Song of Solomon, if misdirected, does the very opposite, and causes, not covers, much temptation and sin. Peter is writing to Christians in Asia Minor who are facing persecution - ‘the fiery ordeal’, he calls it, or the ‘sharing Christ’s sufferings.’ ‘Above all’, he urges, ‘maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.’

II

The Greek word here for love is agape. This is the word for love used most often in the N.T. St John in his first epistle emphasises the supreme importance of love in the Christian faith, and he explains too what it is. ‘Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God, and knows God. He who does not love, does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world to be the expiation of our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.’ So, God’s very nature is love. He demonstrates that love by sending his Son into the world to save us. And we are to respond by showing that same love to others.
Agape, Christian love, if you like, is a very particular, specific form or type of love. The Greek language has four or more words for ‘love’, and agape is one of them. Each word describes a different kind of love. There’s ‘eros’, which is the love extolled in the Song of Solomon – intimate, sexual love. There’s ‘philia’, meaning affectionate regard, or friendship – the kind of love to be found in family, and between friends. And there’s ‘storge’, which describes the strong, empathetic love, felt especially by parents for their children. These three forms of love are natural and spontaneous; they involve emotions and feelings. Agape is different. Agape, Jesus teaches, is the love that treats your neighbour, and indeed your enemy, as yourself. This kind of unconditional love goes against the natural grain. It’s the kind of love that needs grace.

I think the fact that in the English language we have just one word to describe all these very different kinds of love, is a major problem for our Church. It means that English-speaking Christians often mistake agape for what it’s not. So we think that loving our neighbours, as we’re commanded to do, must mean having warm feelings for them; that it must mean liking them, enjoying their company, seeing their point of view. And so we don’t try very hard to love people with whom we don’t have much in common; and instead, we restrict our Christian love to people like us, more often than not to other Christians. Hence the inward-looking holy huddle of many parish churches, and with a Peace at communion that requires hugging and kissing every member of the congregation.
So we don’t work at loving those we don’t naturally love or like. We don’t work at agape, because, mistakenly, we think it must involve feelings and affection. But it doesn’t. Agape, I would suggest, is more an act of the will than of the heart. It’s fundamentally about kindness and generosity; and you can see why, in the King James version of the Bible, agape is translated as ‘charity’. Agape is about treating others as we would like to be treated ourselves. ‘Do unto others,’ says Jesus, ‘as you would have them do unto you.’

And that requires grace. In a series of radio talks on ‘The Four Loves’, C.S. Lewis called agape, ‘Divine Gift-love’. ‘Divine Gift-love,’ he said, ‘is wholly disinterested, and desires what is simply best for the beloved. Divine Gift-love in a man [or woman] enables him [or her] to love what is not naturally lovable - lepers, criminals, enemies, the sulky, the superior, and the sneering.’ And isn’t that precisely the love we see at work in Jesus? Isn’t this an image of what he meant by the Kingdom of God, a world in which God reigns supreme through his disciples’ love for others.

III

This kind of love, this love that treats others as we would like to be treated, with generosity and kindness, is desperately lacking, and desperately needed in the world as it is. All around us we see its absence, and indeed its very opposite at work, in self-serving and contempt.
Our country is becoming dangerously divided and distrustful. Take, as just one example, the Grenfell Tower disaster. What the fallout has focused is an area of London reminiscent of Jesus’ parable of the rich man, living in luxury, and neglectful of the poor man at his gate. The trauma and anger of those who escaped the fire are entirely understandable. But these emotions have uncovered a frightening distrust of anyone in authority; anyone, like the investigating judge, perceived to be part of an establishment of privileged people who can’t understand, and don’t care. We’ve seen that same distrust of professional authority in that heart-rending case of the dying baby, Charlie Gard.

Tragedies like these, and the anger they provoke, bring to the surface divisions and resentment that were already there. We mustn’t overlook the fact that Oxford is another tale of two cities. It’s very hard to believe it when we sit here, but our city is dramatically divided. Ten areas of Oxford are ranked among the country’s 20% most deprived; and eighteen areas are among the 20% most affluent. It’s said that Oxford has the best university in the world, but some of the worst schools in Britain.

IV

How can agape apply to all this? We can see its absence, and we can imagine that, if it were there, these divisions and distrusts would never have occurred. But how can this Christian love be brought to bear? How can it tackle such deep-rooted problems, and transform people’s lives?
There’s no point in pretending that these are anything but very difficult, not to say, overwhelming challenges. Certainly a Christian love that thinks it’s about warm feelings, is useless. It doesn’t even get started, because division and distrust produce such barriers of bitterness and hatred. I don’t think the Church as an institution can help much either. Not even the Church of England has these days the clout, the influence, to affect policy. We’ve spent too long now, withdrawing from the secular world, and focusing instead on our own domestic agenda. Bishops don’t have the voice they had in Parliament; and, in any case, agape, this treating others as ourselves, is not the stuff of policy and legislation.

William Temple used to say that when people ask why the Church isn’t doing something, they mean why isn’t the Archbishop of Canterbury doing something. That’s often true, I think, but it’s clearly misguided. Agape is the response to the gospel of every Christian. And here, and now, we’re getting closer to what can be done to heal divisions and distrust, and build the kingdom of God.

We’re coming close to the three great responsibilities of Christians. First, to serve. Christians need to involve themselves in the world as it is – in politics, social work, education, and the rest. Too often these days a person with a strong, active faith is directed towards ‘Christian ministry’, by which is meant getting ordained, or becoming a reader - serving the Church as an institution, rather than the secular world outside. But there are ample opportunities for Christians to put agape into practice - in council chambers, classrooms, and community centres.
You may, of course, say that Christians are in very short supply, and you’d be right. But that has not discouraged the Church in the past. We are salt and yeast, and we’re mustard seed – ‘smaller than any other, but when it grows, a tree big enough for birds to roost among its branches’. ‘He who would do good to another,’ wrote William Blake, ‘must do it in minute particulars.’

Christian agape at work can have a powerful, inspiring effect, and this brings us to **mission**, the second responsibility of Christians. Mission isn’t all about words; it isn’t just about preaching or Bible bashing. That often does more harm than good. Far more effective is Christian example, and of all examples that can encourage others to take our faith seriously, is the striking example of agape; love, as C.S. Lewis put it, for ‘the not naturally lovable.’ And so agape spreads; the salt savours, the dough rises, and the seed sprouts.

But this is all very well, you may be thinking, for Christians who have the opportunity to make a difference to the divided, distrustful situations I’ve described. But what about us, who are engaged in other valuable work, or are busy bringing up children, or caring for elderly parents? Where does agape fit into our lives?

The answer, of course, is that agape, treating others as we wish to be treated, can apply in any situation. We all have neighbours whom we should love as we love ourselves. But let’s not forget **prayer**, and here’s
the third great Christian responsibility. It was all too easy to despair when we watched that burning tower block, or the anger and hatred that followed; or when we’re reminded of the statistics of inequality in our own city. It’s all too easy to feel paralysed, to feel there’s nothing we can do.

To feel like that is to ignore the infinite power of prayer. ‘More things’, wrote Tennyson, ‘are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.’ There are no limits to prayer. Its objects and effects are not confined to space and time. We can pray for any person, or any situation, in the world, and with just as much power as we can pray for our neighbour next door.

Prayer releases grace. It strengthens those Christians on the front line. It rebukes the hard-hearted and self-seeking. It pours oil on troubled waters, and healing balm on anger and resentment. Above all, it releases into the world that Divine Gift-love, that agape, that allows us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. ‘There is nothing love cannot face,’ wrote St Paul; ‘there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance.’ Amen