“Today I offer you the choice of life and good, or death and evil”

We know what it is to live in sin, but what is it to live in the good? The two lessons we have read today, from Deuteronomy and the Third Epistle of John, both suggest that to live in the good is to do God’s will, keep his commandments, and above all, to love God and one’s neighbour: in Deuteronomy the Israelites are told to ‘love God with all your heart and soul and you will live’; the community to whom John addresses his letter are praised for showing kindness and support to Christian missionaries or preachers, even though they were strangers to them. The missionaries, obedient to God’s call, had gone out ‘for love of Christ’s name’; the community, obedient to God, had supported them in love. To live in the good, then, is to live in love.

But both readings also, interestingly, describe living in the good in the context of exile, a journey, a foreign land. The Israelites have been banished from their land; they are in exile; they are promised that they will be able to return if they obey God, keep his commandments, and love Him: ‘the Lord your God will gather you from there [from their banishment to the ends of the earth], and from there he will fetch you home. The Johannine community have been visited by missionaries who are far away from home, among strangers, but their common faith has meant that the missionaries have been met and received in love; they have, as it were, found a home among them.

We sometimes say ‘Home is where the heart is’ to suggest, I think, that what we love – where our heart is – is also where we find our home, our sense of belonging; a familiar, settled, place where we can rest. This isn’t always something we have but something we recognise and long for – like the Israelites. It isn’t always a physical land or place, however, as the missionaries in the Johannine community discovered, when they found a home – or at least hospitality – in a land of strangers.
I’ve been a bit preoccupied about home and just what home is lately. During the vacation I had to move my mother from the home she had lived in for the last 35 years to a care home. It was an urgent move and although I had chosen the home, was unprepared – but how do you prepare someone who suffers from severe dementia for such a move? Everything was unfamiliar; she lost what frail coordinates she had; she thought that everyone was in her own home and she didn’t want them there. There was no way to explain. She had lost her home – but more importantly, she had lost her sense of home – the familiar, settled place of security, belonging, love. She kept saying that she wanted to go home – but it was clear that this wasn’t the home she had just left but the home that was even more deeply fixed in her memory: home with her mother and her large family of 8 siblings. It was heart-breaking. But I hope and pray that in time, as the care home gradually becomes more familiar and she becomes more settled and feels more secure – dare I hope, loved? – she will feel just a little that it is home and where she belongs.

When I was leaving the room she had been given, having tried to make it feel as homely as possible by bringing familiar things to furnish and decorate it, I felt strongly that it needed a blessing. I can’t bless – I’m a lay canon – but I did say the grace: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all – with Mum in this place – evermore, Amen. I felt that I was beginning to make it home by asking for it to be a place where God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in grace and love and fellowship, dwelt; that like the Israelites or the Johannine missionaries, Mum would find a home in God’s grace, love and fellowship.

God is love, and he who dwells in love dwells in God and God in him. There’s a poem by John Donne called ‘The Good Morrow’. It is clearly a love poem, which describes that extraordinary sense of finding in the person you love your home, your whole world, so that when you look at them, and they look at you, your heart is at rest; you are still; one little room becomes an everywhere. There is no need to travel or to explore, for everything – love, life, home – is found and discovered in the beloved. Here are the last two verses:

*And now good-morrow to our waking souls,*  
*Which watch not one another out of fear;*  
*For love, all love of other sights controls,*  
*And makes one little room an everywhere.*
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.

As ever, with Donne, the words can apply just as well to the relationship of the believer with God as to the lover and his beloved.

As we have heard in sermons and hymns over the last few months, in this season of Christmas and Epiphany we celebrate God’s coming to make his home with us, to dwell with us, Emmanuel: God with us.

Like the Israelites; like the Johannine missionaries; like my mother, He came to a foreign land; an alien, strange, hostile land. He came from heaven to earth; from the Trinity to an earthly womb; and was born to an unmarried mother – not at home, but in an alien land, with no roof over his head but an outdoor shed. It is hard to imagine anything more distant, remote and removed from home than this birth. And yet… this isn’t the point. He came to dwell with us: he came to our sinful, alienated, lost and fragmented world to bring us security, rest, love, a home.

Like the obedience and love of the Israelites; the kindliness of the Johannine community; the lovers in Donne’s poem, He finds – and gives- a home, a sense of belonging – in love: love given and love returned.

I’m reminded of the verses of two poems which we often sing at Christmas and Epiphany, which describe precisely this sense of home being where the heart is. They both describe the moment when the three kings, travelling from their different, distant countries, guided by a star, bring their offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the homeless new baby. You can probably already guess them: The first is the last verse of Christina Rossetti’s poem ‘In the bleak mid-winter’, which asks:
What can I give him?
Poor as I am
If I were a shepherd
I would give a lamb
If I were a wise man
I would do my part
But what I can I give him
Give him my heart

And I wonder if Rossetti was inspired by the last verse of Peter Cornelius’ poem, which we sing as the hymn ‘Three Kings from Persian Lands Afar’

Thou child of man, lo, to Bethlehem
The Kings are travelling, travel with them!
The star of mercy, the star of grace,
Shall lead thy heart to its resting place.
Gold, incense, myrrh thou canst not bring;
Offer thy heart to the infant King.

Home is where the heart is.

“Today I offer you the choice of life and good, or death and evil”

May we choose life and good by giving our hearts to the God who is love; who in love came to dwell with us. May we find in Him our home, our rest, our security, our safety, our love and our delight, wherever we may be and however alien the world might feel.