

Candlemas, 2 February 2020

I am indebted to Very Revd Mark Oakley, the dean of St John's College, Cambridge, for much of the content of this sermon.

It can't be much fun being a bishop. Yes, you do get to dress up a lot and wear a funny hat, and, more importantly, you are always guaranteed a seat in the cathedral. Technically, the bishop is the focus of unity in a diocese, but the reality is, more often than not, she or he is the focus of having a good old moan. Bishops can get blamed for all sorts of things: 'what are you going to do about the mad vicar we have?' 'The diocese is taking all our money?' 'The Church should take a firm stand against... well, anything under the sun, from Tesco club card points to wind farms.' Because of all this, being a bishop is a very difficult job, but they can, on occasion, score some spectacular own goals. Ten days ago, the House of Bishops issued a pastoral statement on civil partnerships for heterosexual couples in which they stated that, because such unions were not marriages, couples in a civil partnership should not have sex, neither should the clergy bless their union.

Well, I don't intend to get embroiled in the specific fallout from this, which has been considerable (although the archbishops have now issued an apology for releasing the statement); as we speak the Church of England is holding conversations about human sexuality which should be published in a document, *Living in Love and Faith* in the summer. But the thing that struck many people most about the pastoral statement was its language. In a 1,600 word document about human relationships, their variety and their significance, the word 'love' was not mentioned once (save in referring to the title of the aforementioned document). A pastoral statement came across, then, as anything but pastoral, but cold, unfeeling and, more to the point, unloving.

This is what beggared belief most because, after all, are we not about love? Love is at the heart of the Christian world view: God is love, and everyone who lives in love lives in God, so Jesus says in St John's Gospel. What the disciples were doing when they followed Jesus was not following a way of life, with endless pastoral statements being issued as to how that life should be lived, but a way of love. Jesus showed us how to love.

The trouble is, the word 'love' has been devalued so much in our popular culture as to be almost rendered meaningless. Pop songs, so they say, bleat endlessly about love, romcoms are stitched together by a sentimental gloop that is called love, and, so people say, love is something that happens on an island somewhere, where toothy, tanned couples are gawped at on the telly by people are clearly too bored to do anything else. Before we drown in the sugar bath that love has become, we must realise that love is so much more than this! Love is about being caught and held by another; it is about being healed by the givingness of the other, it gives us meaning, identity, self-worth, a sense that I matter and am cared for. Yes, of course, it is about sex, but not all sex is about love (which, in referring to sex and not to love, the pastoral statement did not counter,

and which perpetuated the notion that most people have of the Church, which is that we are obsessed and terrified about what goes on in the bedroom).

So how did Jesus teach *this* love? Well, as I say, he didn't write pastoral statements. Instead he demonstrated it: he touched the leper, he invited the outcast to supper, he gave bread to the hungry, he challenged the hypocrisy of the priests before the prostitute, he didn't scapegoat, he taught about good Samaritans and prodigal sons, and even more prodigal fathers, he saw the person and not the label. He loved people for who they were.

Today is Candlemas, the end of the Christmas, and on this day something very special happens to love. Candlemas is the fulcrum around which the nature of Christian love pivots. Between Christmas and now, encompassing the season of Epiphany, we have been engaged in a special kind of love: it is the love of adoration, of gazing upon the Christ-child, being held by him, transfixed by him. This is the love of the lover's gaze, of *beholding*, of being still before the one loves you. This is where love seeks to dwell in the depth of your soul.

But now everything turns 180 degrees. From inward contemplation, we turn our gaze outwards as we head towards Lent, with Jesus not in the stable but in the wilderness, where love rolls its sleeves up and delves into the darker places of the world. The love that, in loving, also challenged. We all know how *that* story ended. Love embracing Calvary. And yet love that is not love in action, that does not encounter Calvary, is not true love. It is not just about beholding, it is about that beholding generating in us a response to love others as we are being loved. It is about caring for the sick, the stranger, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the imprisoned. It is about being silent, absolutely silent, before someone who is suffering the loss of a child (what could words do in that situation anyway?), communicating as much as you can, that that person is being held by your love. And that love will crunch up against systems and individuals who would, for whatever reason, thwart it. But that must not stop love from doing what it must do.

And it does not matter a hoot who does this: young, old, male, female, gay, straight, black, white. The whole of humanity is caught up in the great, limitless, universal project of love, a love that sometimes dare not speak its name, but a love that is at the heart of the Christian witness. Paraphrasing St Paul, the Christian faith will teach you nothing; a pastoral letter will teach you nothing; this sermon will teach you nothing (!) without the spark of love that must accompany it. The best teaching, pastoral letters and sermons are those given by the widow, who didn't actually say anything, but who gave everything she had. They are given by the father who embraced his wayward son with a love beyond comprehension, they are told in the kindness with which we must comport ourselves, even in the middle of difficult times.

Follow me, said Jesus. Follow me in love. For they who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.