



Sunday 17th May - 6th Sunday of Easter

In the name of the Father +, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is love? There can be no other subject that has been sung about, written about, painted, more than love. Pop music is, and has been for centuries, usually about the glories of love, or the pains of it; our magazines and newspapers are full of stories and advice about love and relationships; most programmes on television and films have some element of love or romance in them; we even have a day of the year devoted to love. But even with all of this exposure to the joys and pains of love, does it help us to understand what love truly is?

In our second reading from the first letter of S. John, we heard one of the most famous verses in the Bible: 'God is love'. For the Christian, that fundamental truth about the nature of God is, and should be, the basis upon which we live our lives and view the world. The fact that the God whom we worship and strive to serve is 'love' should inform the way we seek to reflect his love in a world where there seems to be less of a focus on a God of love, than on atrocities and evil that are perpetrated in his name. In our post-modern, post-Christian world that fundamental Christian truth that 'God is love' has been turned around, so that the modern axiom is 'love is God', and therefore the pursuit of love, or what is considered to be love, is made the supreme goal of our society.

But this must not be so for the Christian, who is called to model their entire life on the fact that 'God is love', and to live out Jesus' commandments to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. We Christians need to reclaim what it means for God to be love, and to proclaim that to the world, so that the distortions and perversions that claim to be true expressions of love in our world today may be shown up for what they are: not love, but sin.

This brings us back to my question, 'What is love?' If we are going to live and proclaim what love truly is, then we need to be sure of it ourselves. We acknowledge that God is love, and by that we mean that God cannot be anything but love: he is love and nothing else; all he is love. And, as lovers of God, and as loved by him, we are called to reflect his love for us in our love for him and our fellow human beings. Love is the first of the theological virtues, and as S. Paul tells us, is the most important: 'Meanwhile these three abide: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.' Love, or charity, is the virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbour as ourselves for love of God. S. Paul tells us in the first letter to the Corinthians all of the things that love is and is not, but to sum them up we can say that love always seeks the good of others. If love does not seek goodness and truth, then it is not love. So love, or charity, is the virtue and the emotion by which we seek good in all things, and by so doing we reflect in our own lives the love of God and the fact that he is love. God's love seeks the good of his creation, and so must ours in order to be true love. There are many examples of so-called 'love' in our world that manifestly do not

seek the good of others, and thus they are not true expressions of love, nor are they reflections of the love of God.

By seeking the good of others, we love our neighbours: by acts of charity and kindness we try to show in a practical way that we love God and are reflecting his love to others because we love him. To love others is a risky business as we all know: that love can be spurned, it can be rejected, it can be taken fore-granted, it can be abused; but this must not stop us from loving one another, and doing works of love. Jesus tells us in this morning's Gospel reading that 'If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love'. There is no point in us loving our neighbour if that love isn't translated into action. It is only by the keeping of Jesus' command to love, that we remain in his love, and share in his love, and reflect his love. S. Paul says, 'If I have not love, I am worth nothing', and as the old collect says, 'without charity our deeds are nothing worth'.

Our love for God and for our neighbour must bear fruit: we can't keep it to ourselves, and nor should we want to. The God who is love, loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to die for love of sinful humanity. S. John says, 'God's love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son so that we could have life through him; this is the love I mean: not our love for God, but God's love for us when he sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away.' God's love translated into action when Christ came into the world and offered his life as a gift of pure love to his Father for the sins of the world: it is that love alone that takes our sins away, that perfect expression of what it means to love. Jesus says, 'A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you.' We are God's friends, we are Jesus' disciples, and we are called to show in real action in our lives that God is love. We are called to the practical outliving of Jesus' command to love God and our neighbour. It is not an optional extra to the Christian life: it is fundamental. With S. Paul, if we have not love, we are a sounding gong or a clashing symbol. Just as God put his love into action by sending his Son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away, so we need to put our love into action: without deeds of charity, our love for God and neighbour is worth nothing: it is in our practical works of charity that we show our love for God and our neighbour. S. Augustine says, 'Love is itself the fulfilment of all our works. There is the goal; that is why we run: we run toward it, and once we reach it, in it we shall find rest.' In deeds of love, we find fulfilment, and we remain in Christ's love by keeping his command.

Jesus showed by his life, death and resurrection, the outworking of the truth that God is love: by laying down his life for his friends (us), he showed what love truly is, and is capable of; and it was the power of that love that raised him from death, that love that can never be defeated or destroyed. This is the love we are called to live in, and mirror and share: this is what love is really about, with all its risks, dangers and disappointments. It is about doing the will of God, and loving with all our beings for love of the God whose only Son, God and man, died and rose again for love of us. Listen again to the words of Jesus: 'You did not choose me, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last...What I command you is to love one another.'

Amen.