

16 May 2010

Easter 7C

Sermon notes: John 17.20-26

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Listen again to part of this morning's gospel reading:

*"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. [NRSV]*

This is a passage of very circular logic. It's not that Jesus is trying to be obscure, but that he is speaking of a reality which doesn't lend itself to simple description. If we come to hear it under the weight of preconceived ideas of God and ourselves, the logic becomes all the more confused. We're in the realm here of the doctrine of the Trinity, although the Spirit is not explicitly mentioned. We hear of the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the relationship between the Son and the church, and the relationship between the Father-Son relationship and the Son-church relationship(!) are all intimately tied together. God, and for that matter human beings, is not something you can describe in a nice straight line, beginning at one point and ending at another; there is a sense in which everything has to be said at once, and no thing necessarily needs to be said before any other. It is the say-everything-at-once aspect which gives the around-and-around feel of our gospel reading today. But this trinitarian way of speaking of God, and of ourselves in relation to God, is more than just more *information* about us and God; It all makes a difference for how we understand ourselves as disciples of Jesus.

I want to focus this morning on a theme which is somewhat hidden in our reading but still very much present: that of "mission". I suspect that for most of us the notion of mission, and the associated idea of evangelism, suggest a process of passing along information about God to those who haven't heard it before. There is undoubtedly a dimension of this in evangelism, but notion of "mission" in this morning's gospel reading is quite different:

*"[I ask...] that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me"*

This text clearly has to do with mission, in that its concern is that "the world may know". But the way in which the world comes to know is not along the lines of the church going out and telling the story. The coming-to-know of the world is a matter not of the action of the church but of the action of God in making the church "one". It is what *God* does to the disciples of Jesus which is the sign of the sending of the Son. What God does to the disciples is create a unity which points towards the unity of God.

The priority of God in this is of critical importance. To the extent that evangelism is basically *our* work, then spreading the good news becomes something of a moral command, something we have to do, like other things we are commanded to do, or not to do. But the fact that what Jesus says here is said within the context of a prayer indicates that the real work is not at all what we do in God's name but what *God* does *to us*, in God's own name.

*"...may [they] become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."*

The Christian congregation is not simply to demonstrate or show or speak about God's love to the world; it is in a sense to *become* that love, by the action of God himself. Now, there is a real danger here of idealising the church. In particular the danger is that instead of defining the church by the love of God we come to defining God by the love of the church. And we're well aware of how capable Christian communities are of *not* being shining examples of the love of God. But the failure of the church is not the failure of the gospel, but simply the *need* for the gospel. Jesus prays for the community of believers because it is *not* in the love which is its destiny. The important point is that it is the experience of love for which Jesus prays that is the thing which he says will reveal God not only to the believers but also to those who see this love taking shape

This recasts altogether what it means to be involved in the mission of God. The mission – literally the sending – of the church is in the first and all-determining instance God's sending of the *Son*. The sending of the Son is not simply an event which happens *somewhere* in our midst but something which happens *to us*: Jesus prays for "...they in us"... I in them...the love with which you have loved me be in them, and I in them..." If we were to speak of "salvation" here, to be saved would be to be in love – to be in the love of God by being "in love" with relation to each other.

Now, there's a danger that all of this, because of the circularity of its logic, becomes a beautiful image but also one which becomes devoid of any particular content. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father and the Son loves the disciples and the love among the disciples is as the love between the Father and the Son, and so on. Yet what, in actual fact, does that love *look like*? What shape does Christian discipleship take in relation to those with whom we are not yet "in love"?

John's answer is the cross – "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son..." or, from the letters of John, "this is love: not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be an atoning sacrifice" (1 John 4.10). But even this is too "pat" an answer. To get into the nitty gritty of this kind of love we have to see how the love of the Father for the Son – what we might call a "pure" love simply by definition – is affected by the love of the Son for his disciples. For, although we might say that the love of the Son for his disciples is "pure", it can scarcely be said that this is the case the other way around. Jesus prays for his disciples not only because they do not yet love each other but because they have not yet loved him. If it makes any sense to imagine God in heaven being a community of perfecting love separate from the fallen world, then "when" God enters the world in the Son that perfecting love gets dirty or messy. We might even say that the perfect love of God is "stained" by the imperfections of the world.

This way of putting it might seem odd to us today, but it has been understood very much in that way in the past, and this is the reason for the way the Nicene Creed piles up all sort of phrases describing Jesus' "divinity": "God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father..."

All of this is attached to the name Jesus because, if Jesus is truly a human being, then the troubling question is, how can the perfect love which is God take shape in what, by virtue of being human, is *necessarily* imperfect? For Jesus, if truly human, is necessarily touched and affected by all that is wrong and unhealthy in human existence. The solution of the problem of Jesus' humanity is the good news of God in Jesus Christ – that love is not a static condition but a dynamic power. This love is not a quality or a quantity but *does* something – and so *changes* things.

Which is also to say that love is itself changed. If we grant the idea of God sending Jesus into the world, then it has to be said that it is an utter *disaster* that Jesus ends up being crucified. Those familiar theologies of the atonement which speak of Jesus somehow "having" to die according to some cosmic order for salvation distract us from the disaster of the crucifixion by sewing it all up too quickly. For mere death – our death or the death of Jesus – achieves nothing, for it is a breaking of love. The absence of love in any community is, in a similar way, the presence of death.

But John declares that God so loved the world, that he did not shy away from the prospective disaster of love lost; that *this* is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us, sent the Son, and made of our lack of love an "atoning sacrifice".

God is marked, stained, by these failures of love. But the gospel is that with this God those stains, those failures in love, become the basis not of the reign of failure and death, the basis of not yet more violence and retribution, but the basis of a yet

richer love. The dynamism of the love of this God is that it creates out of nothing. The pain and power of death – the dark nothingness which it presents to us – is shown in Christ's path to the cross to be powerful indeed, but though it is formless and void it is shown nevertheless to be material in the hands of God for the purposes of life and love. Life and love spring from death not by the natural processes of seeds dying and rising, but by an acknowledgement of inability and failure and a capacity to live through it and beyond it.

This is the love God has for the world: the power to take what is formless and empty and to make of it something of beauty and life. When Jesus prays that his disciples might be one, then, it is this forgiving love which will make this possible. And what is the kind of love to be known *among* Jesus' disciples? Just the same love which is forgiveness. The "mission" of the church is to love as God has loved.

As such, the first thing the church has to "do" – is to be loved – which is not actually something we do at all, for that we are loved is something quite out of our hands.

The first thing we do, then, is join our prayers to the prayer of Jesus, which is that we *might indeed* know the love of God, that we might *become* that love, that the world might know what love can be.

Our mission is as simple, and as difficult as that.

By the grace of God, may such love abound for us and among us. Amen.