



Sermon preached by Revd Derek Wales on 18th July 2021

Readings: Genesis 2: 4b-7, 18-25, I John 4: 7-12, 19-21, Luke 6: 27-36

If there is one word that I think should be used very sparingly in sermons it is the word 'I'. I am sure we have all at some time known that feeling, on coming out of worship, that we have learnt a great deal more about the preacher but not a great deal more about the gospel of Jesus Christ. On the other hand it was your minister Nigel who said in one of his own sermons 'sermons arise out of life's realities'. And never for me has that been more true than today. Some of you, if not most of you, know of my recent lived reality: the loss of my wife Anne through a few seconds of madness of a drunken driver, and by that being thrust into a situation of aloneness, sometimes real loneliness.

And may I pause here to express my deep gratitude to so many of you who have used Zoom, e-mails and also in three cases visits to my home to welcome me back warmly into the family of first Emanuel and St. Columba's and then Downing Place as if the last 25 years had not passed at all.

So that is where I am coming from. But it is not simply I - and here I hope I can move away from that word - for just a few weeks after my bereavement thousands of other people found themselves in a situation of aloneness through the COVID-19 pandemic, either being shut away in their own homes or isolated in a care home, or losing by death a loved relative or partner - probably, like me, without the opportunity to say goodbye. And where that aloneness gave rise to a deep loneliness we have been led to see more clearly mental health problems arise on a wide scale

And suddenly, almost as if it had never been noticed before, we were being urged from every side to recognise the importance to us of relationships, of needing each other. What a revelation! Relationships as an essential part of the human condition! I know that many people enjoy their own company and others actually seek isolation, climbing mountains or rowing across the Atlantic, but they do so only because like everyone else they have become who they are through their relationship to others, that process which has its vital personhood-shaping formation from the moment of birth. Rowan Williams argues that our very consciousness has a relational dimension - 'I cannot think without thinking of the other' he writes.

So I found myself led to ask: is there a particularly Christian way of coming at that truth? Does our view of ourselves as people under God and called by him through Christ to serve him in his kingdom give new depth to that common understanding of the indispensability of our bonds to each other?

Let me offer three reflections.

First, our relations to each other are rooted in God's own being. The clue is given in two words from the opening two chapters of Genesis. First, God said of Adam 'it is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helper to be his partner'. God's plan for human beings from the start was that they should be in partnership with each other. And the clue to the nature of that partnership lies, for us as Christians, in another word in Genesis, this time from the first poem about creation: 'let us make humankind in our image', a word to which a new depth of vision and wonder has been given by God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We see now that humankind reflects the community within the Godhead. God has relationship within God self, the participation of one God in three persons and of the three persons in the one Godhead that we experience as the mystery of the Trinity. One God, yes! One God and only one and no other, but dynamic not static, living, moving, giving, receiving, attending, caring - in short loving. That is the pattern for our own being.

And not only the pattern, for in reaching out to us in Christ God has given us a deep connection with God's own being so that our relationship with God shapes our relationships with one another. So that is the second way in which our Christian faith enhances our understanding. Our being rooted in God and reflecting God's dynamic interaction with Godself determines the quality of our relationships - not only that they are essential to our being but also that in their truest, undistorted, nature they are loving. And now there's a word! If I said at the beginning that there was one word to be used only sparingly, here is one that in its widest broadest and deepest sense should pervade every sermon. For the gospel teaches us that the desired aim of God is that our relationships should be loving - relating to the other person as we always want them to relate to us - giving, receiving, attending, caring - forging that circular flow of sacrificial energy that builds up us and the other. It is a quality of relationship that brings joy, enhances companionship and satisfies the longing of the soul not to be alone. It goes to the heart of who and what we are. Where that flow of love between persons is broken or distorted, we are hurt and diminished. Then there is a need for healing, healing that only a renewal of self-giving love can bring. As followers of Jesus we find the source of that sacrificial love in the spirit of God active through Jesus Christ.

So, first, the source of our relationships is grounded in God. Second, that grounding in God's love determines the quality of our relationships. Third, the destiny of our relationships is in God. And here we move beyond human wisdom, even that informed by the gospel, firmly into the realm of faith. We look for the ultimate fulfilment of our relationships in heaven. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead leads us to look forward and hope that the core of our being, our essential self, will find its true fulfilment in that realm which lies beyond this life. Here, as Jesus taught us in his pattern prayer, God's will is done. But that presents a real challenge to our faith. If God's will for us is the fulfilling of our relationships does that imply that in heaven all broken relationships are mended, that there is a full restoration of love, a completeness of forgiveness? Bishop Richard Harries has written 'the community of heaven is heaven not just because its inhabitants are at one with God but because they are at one with one another ... It seems impossible and outrageous that a victim should have to come to a positive relationship with (a)perpetrator of suffering. Yet if heaven is to be heaven that has to be the case'

So the source, the quality, and the destiny of human relationships are all rooted in God. They are created in love, for love, and reflect his internal and outgoing love.

But how does this gospel speak to a heart crippled by a sense of deprivation, by loneliness, by the loss of human contact? I wonder whether in trying to answer that question we might find ourselves in a serious counter-cultural critique of the shape of the society we have let ourselves be led into, where a crisis such as the Covid pandemic has revealed, yes, how much people are moved to help each other, but also how the weakest and most vulnerable can be left to fend for themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually.

And here we find a call to respond to God's love in Christ. I have spoken of how strengthening I found the love of concerned friends in my own time of trial and sorrow. I have sensed more strongly than before the call to reach out to others similarly hurt, in a way that brings some good, something positive, out of loss, perhaps a way of making real Christ's words, 'Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it to me'. In this life, at least, that would seem, for a Christian, to point to the true fulfilment of every human relationship.