



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 5th May 2024

Readings: *Psalm 98; 1 John 5.1-6; John 3.16-17 and 15.9-17*

Easter VI

Text: ‘... this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.’ I John 5.4 (36)

Prayer: May these spoken words about a written word, by the Spirit of God become a lively word about the Word made flesh, even Jesus Christ, Amen

Looking at the world, there is so much to admire. Nature - as Bruce Sanguin, the Canadian theologian puts it: *Holy is this cosmos, whirling, expanding, living, dying, yearning for abundance and freedom, imperfect holiness, reaching for a promise of wholeness, yet always, already a perfect reflection of Spirit.*¹ Then as we look at the world, we might admire the amount of intelligence there is, and art, virtuous and noble living, freedom, freedom to be, and the limitless potential of imagination, creativity and productivity. Little wonder that God loved the world so much: enough to give that only begotten Son.

Looking at the world, there is so much to regret. Natural disaster worsened by human exploitation, by which, says Sanguin, we *chase after the tawdry and transient, while the simple practice of abundant life eludes us*.² And then there’s untruth. Injustice. Poverty. Inhumanity. Toleration of the intolerable. Little wonder that God lamented the world’s condition so much: enough to give that only begotten Son.

As I read of what Scripture says God means, what God proposes, by coming in Jesus, I am struck by the strength of the Bible’s language. In the Gospel of John, we discover that Jesus’ *‘overcomes’* the world³ and in the first letter of John people of faith are to *‘conquer’* the world. Now, do we not tend to use those words pretty negatively?

Oh yes, we might *overcome* an illness or a temptation, but the *overcoming* of another person or group or nation is about getting the better of them, putting them in their place, even subjugating them, replacing their culture, their idea of what a country is with ours. And isn’t that how we too often treat creation itself, profoundly confusing good stewardship with exploitation.

All the more so, we might with Robert Louis Stevenson, speak of *‘conquering’* what he calls ‘the world within’: *‘passion ... wayward will ... and selfishness’*,⁴ and maybe we learn to conquer an unhelpful desire for too many biscuits – or maybe we don’t. More often than not, though, when we use the word ‘conquer’ we are thinking of episodes like that Norman King, William I,⁵ invading and defeating England at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. And what do the President of Russia really intend with the so called ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine, and the Chinese government with its treatment of the Uyghur ethnic group in the Xinjiang region? It looks like conquering to me.

There is a stark contrast, then, when we speak of people with Christian faith ‘conquering the world’. This is *not* to do with violent suppression, triumphal invasion, or final destruction. Central to Christian faith is the conviction that Jesus did not come to ‘condemn the world, but to save it’,⁶ to rescue it, to turn it back up the right way.

So, the suggestion that Christians are to ‘conquer the world’ by their faith needs a nuanced approach. It’s not about the costly, violent and often ruthless crusading of a millennium ago, crushing people of convictions different from our own, not least those of Muslim faith. Nor is our conquering the world the enthusiastic and often well-intentioned evangelical mission of a couple of centuries ago, which took

¹ Sanguin, Bruce 2010 *If Darwin Prayed: prayers for evolutionary mystics* Vancouver: Self-published page 187 – from a Eucharistic Prayer entitled, *Cosmic Sacrifice*.

² *ibid* page 47

³ John 16.33

⁴ Stevenson Robert Louis, from the poem, *My Kingdom*:

⁵ 1028-87

⁶ John 3.17

‘the glorious Gospel of the blessed God’⁷ to ‘faraway places with strange sounding names’,⁸ sometimes trampling upon dignity and culture, and other understandings of the nation state, even as education and medicine and Jesus were so sacrificially enabled.

Just as our personal faith is that Jesus puts us right with God, that we might have eternal life,⁹ so we called to model our ‘conquering of the world’ upon the way Jesus did it?

First, in Jesus we see that by ‘conquer’ we don’t mean ‘condemn’, either. Christian mission cannot be about rejecting and supplanting what was as we impose what we believe should be. It is to do with overcoming those things which mar the world, rob the world of God’s glory, besmirch the image of God in all that God has made, and turn the world upside down.

Secondly, in Jesus we see how that ‘overcoming’ is not by tyranny, brutality or control, not by lies or distortion, but by a radical demonstration of grace and truth:¹⁰ the grace that embodies God, and the truth that defines God. In Jesus, God’s judging of the world was shaped by love. Remember last week’s description of God’s love as ‘concern, commitment, communication, community and involvement.’¹¹ That’s the Jesus way of loving, and it models for us a way of conquering so much that otherwise distorts and even destroys today’s world: so we conquer not with lies but with truth; not by trampling over but by walking beside; not by bearing grudges but by sharing burdens; we conquer not by understanding green as a euphemism for naive but as ecological wisdom, being ecologically savvy in pursuit of ‘a future in which people and planet thrive together’.¹² The Jesus way of loving conquers not by turning a blind eye but by determinedly resisting what simply isn’t right; it conquers by distributing our largesse so that none of us is content with having too much until all have enough; conquers by speaking the truth in love,¹³ which means diluting neither the truth nor the love; it conquers not by peace-breaking but by peace-making. For you see, the Jesus way of loving, of conquering is not death-dealing but life-giving.

The first epistle of John holds out the beautiful promise that those who put their trust in God as God is in Jesus, are children of God. That is a free and undeserved gift. Receiving the gift, we are driven irresistibly into living as faithful and obedient children of that parent. Called into a world which needs conquering with a concerned, committed, and involved love as much as ever it did, the Christian’s vocation can seem to be overwhelming. How are we to love in that way? And in truth, it is not easy. How could it be? Children of the God who ‘so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One’¹⁴ are called to a love reflecting that One’s devotion. When that Only Begotten One urges us to love like that, saying ‘my yoke is easy, and my burden light’¹⁵ it’s not meant to suggest God’s demands are unexacting but that as the children of a parent who loves like that, we ‘are accompanied by the assurance of power to fulfil’ the call.¹⁶ As we could read earlier in I John, ‘Little children, you are from God, and have conquered [what is *not* from God]; for the one who is in *you* is greater than the one who is in the *world*.’¹⁷

And because we are in need of that One who is ‘greater’ we come to this Table. Held out to us here in something as simple as ripped bread and red wine are the sign and seal of that assurance and power. We do not even have to come to get them; they are brought to us, right where we are and just *as* we are, that we might go from here renewed in readiness to love as we have been loved, thereby to conquer what otherwise will conquer the world. That will be to bear fruit that lasts. May it be so, and thanks be to God. Amen

N. P. Uden, 5th May 2024

⁷ I Timothy 1.11. This was the Biblical text that defined the purpose of the London Missionary Society in 1795.

⁸ From the eponymous 1948 song by Alex Kramer 1903-98 and his wife, Joan Whitney 1914-90.

⁹ John 3.16

¹⁰ John 1.14

¹¹ see McIntyre, John 1962 *On the Love of God* London: Collins page 58

¹² from the website of Client Earth – Available at www.clientearth.org; accessed 5th May 2024

¹³ Ephesians 4.15

¹⁴ John 3.16, as in the *Inclusive Bible*, page 699

¹⁵ Matthew 11.30 NRSV

¹⁶ Dodd, C. H. 1946 *The Johannine Epistles* London: Hodder and Stoughton, page 126

¹⁷ I John 4.4