



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 27th June 2021

Readings: Lamentations 3.22-33, Psalm 30, II Corinthians 8.7-15, Mark 5.21-43

I am often struck by how Christian faith holds in tension both the enormity and the intimacy of things. The enormity of our concerns for the world, and the intimacy at the heart of our daily lives: the enormity of our understanding of God, and the intimacy of God's understanding of us – farther than the farthest star, yet closer than breathing; 'source, guide and goal of all that is',¹ yet knowing the (changing) number of hairs on our head.²

Earlier in the service we were thinking of that enormity, as we pondered the planet: the distance from us here in Cambridge to where Catherine, Neil and Rebekah live; the significance of the climate emergency and its implications for far reaching international strategies, as well as for our personal lifestyle choices.

And then we heard of two women in difficulty. One was persistently haemorrhaging badly – it's the tale of what one woman has described as 'the relentless eking away of her life'³ and, and the other was imminently dying. When we are affected by such things, the scope of our attention and concern drastically narrows. Suddenly, Pacific Island coastlines matter little, compared with the wellbeing of loved ones, or even of ourselves.

At such times, the promise of Lamentations 3 is read to us. 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God may cause grief, but will have compassion according to the abundance of God's steadfast love.'

How is it, when we are *in extremis*, when the scope of our life has been so reduced that all we can think about is ours or someone else's suffering, that such a difference is made by being told the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases? Aren't they the very times when we think not only that it has ceased, but it's gone away. Gone away as far as that farthest star.

St Paul was no stranger to this sort of experience. Imprisonment, shipwreck, illness. Yet he holds onto that striking thought about Jesus Christ, that 'though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty – by that reducing the scope of himself so that we could see and grasp him - you might become rich.' Paul's confidence rests in the sacrificial nature of God's love as it is in Jesus. In that unique understanding of God, which Jesus's cradle and cross offer to us, God isn't isolated, not far away, but immersed in the struggle that is human life, and in the vulnerability that is the planet's plight.

In his book, *The Crucified God*, Jürgen Moltmann stresses God's interest in creation. That is what lies, says Prof Moltmann, at the heart of the covenant relationship which God forges with creation. It's precisely because God is interested in everything that God has made that God can be stirred to wrath when that which God has made goes wrong. As Moltmann has it, 'The opposite of love is not wrath, but indifference. Indifference ... would be a retreat on the part of God from the covenant. ... [God's] wrath is an expression of [God's] interest in [humanity].'⁴ Such is the commitment of God to us when we endure life-threatening or life-defining things like Jairus' daughter and the ailing woman endured. By assuming – by taking upon Godself - the reality of our lot, God so identifies with us that when we suffer, we are invited to trust that God is with us. Moreover, it is not an idle,

¹ Romans 11.36 New English Bible

² Luke 12.7

³ Stamper, Meda A. A. 2014 *Embodying Mark: fresh ways to read, pray and live the Gospel* London: SPCK page 31

⁴ Moltmann, Jürgen 1973 *The Crucified God* Translated 1974 by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden London: SCM Press (2001) page 281

thumb-twiddling presence that's waiting for this unfortunate episode to pass, but one which the cross symbolically defines as complete identification with our suffering. It is not remote but right here in the dust and grime of human life. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

Is this not the challenge of the church's vocation, too - to be a reliable and unrelenting embodiment of God's interest in suffering people and a struggling planet? What we do not see in Jesus is an indifferent God. And indifference is not what God looks for in those who follow Jesus.

So, as we look at the news and the things that make us tut or sigh or switch to a more cheerful channel, Jesus calls out of us something more. Something rather more rigorous.

When we look at people being abused or disadvantaged because of their race, it is not enough to opine that we are not racist. We best mirror Christ's self-emptying commitment by being determinedly *anti*-racist, in what we say and in the way we order society. Beginning with those societies in which we live and work ourselves – the places that employ us, the places in which we live, the places in which we worship. Dr King's dream will remain just that until we, not they, make it a reality.⁵

When we look at the life of the church and regret that paucity of younger people, it is not enough to opine that we wish there were more children and teens and families, like there used to be. We best mirror Christ's truly inter-generational ministry – 'let the children come to me' ⁶ - by working to make our life and work appropriate to a missing generation. It's not about that generation accepting the church as we like it, but about us all ensuring the church is something for everyone, and that includes some things that we don't like. Let the children come to me.

And when we observe the decline in standards of loyalty and faithfulness in personal relationships, it is not enough to raise an eyebrow or rant about another regrettable sign of the times. Whatever else the Church should be, it should be one of the voices that is ready to speak of the ideal of fidelity in the home, because that is the key to stability, cohesion, justice and joy in society. You see, the Church has just as much right as anyone else to influence the mores of the age. We do not have to give in to standards of moral behaviour just because everyone now thinks 'they will do'. Followers of Jesus do not find in him one who capitulated to the mores of the age. Pliability to the spirit that was in him, will give us a voice that urges us to be as loyal to one another as is the One who endures beside us forever. The steadfast love from which nothing will separate us.

We come into church to be reminded of God's interest in us. We go from church to make known in all we say and do the truth of God's interest in the world. Given both the enormity and the intimacy of God's interest, we may find that we show it forth as we change our lifestyle to be more ecologically beneficial with a mind to preserving the planet, or as we sit at the bedside of the dying with a mind to making real the love of God that will hold a hand till it goes cold. We will also show God's covenant-expressed interest by what we say ... provided that we then model what we say in what we do. Such you see is what Jesus did when he became poor that all creation and you and I might become rich.

May God give us the grace, the courage, the integrity and the power of God's Spirit so to live.

N. P. Uden

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⁵ Martin Luther King Speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial 28th August 1963

⁶ Mark 10.14