



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 3rd April 2022
Readings: Isaiah 43.18-21; Philippians 3.7-14; John 12.1-8

Is the Christian life about me and God, or about God and all creation? Of course, the answer is ‘both, and’. It’s patently absurd to think that God’s purposes are first and finally about me. It’s the *world* God so loved. ⁱ It’s the *world* that, in Christ, God was reconciling to Godself. ⁱⁱ

But the Bible’s witness is that each and every one of us is embraced within that world God loves and reconciles. From the first pages of Scripture, this God of a global concern and purpose, is described as relating to individuals: Adam & Eve, Abram & Sarai, Moses & Aaron. And generations later there’s the intimacy of Christ’s encounters with Anna & Simeon, James & John, Mary & Martha, a nameless robber on his right & another on his left, Cleopas & their companion. The most famous of all the psalms records the writer’s boldest of claims: not that the Lord is sovereign over all that is, in its enormity and anonymity, but that the Lord is ‘my Shepherd’. God and I, suggests the Psalm, are ‘in a shepherd and sheep situation.’ Name known. Moreover, when Jesus is asked about the greatest commandments, he reminds his lone enquirer of Israel’s ancient law, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all you are – heart and soul and mind and strength.’ ⁱⁱⁱ

This ‘source, guide and goal of all that is’, ^{iv} reaches out to each one of us with gift and guarantee, challenge and choice. Alongside the universal reach of God’s authority and affection, there is something personal about it. In this season of Lent, and not least now that we have entered Passiontide, we are beckoned to take this seriously. When we have wandered – and which of us is not prone to that? – this season invites each of us to return to God. When the world has gone awry – and how else can we describe Yemen, Ukraine and Afghanistan, utility bills, inflation and climate change but as the world gone awry? - this season invites each of us not to shrug our shoulders in corporate helplessness, less still to look to others to take the responsibility, but to turn to God.

The Gospel readings last Sunday and today give the personal nature of faith a particularly potent expression. Last week we heard the parable of the Lost Son – the one who wanted his inheritance and having received it, wasted it on dissolute living. It’s a story in which we are invited to find the most breathtaking expression of God’s love. Beyond any reasonable comparison with his younger son’s prodigal wastefulness, the Father opens our eyes to the utterly prodigal nature of God’s love. Its reckless extravagance is meant to captivate us in amazement, until we sing ‘love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.’ ^v

Matt Redman is a Christian song writer whose work speaks to Dan Joseph, who will become a member today. One of Redman’s songs could have been sung by the lost son, whose father found him. It’s about heaven’s perfect mystery, heaven’s perfect melody; it’s the Father’s Song. *Listen to the recorded song.*

I have heard so many songs
 Listened to a thousand tongues
 But there is one
 That sounds above them all

The Father's song
 The Father's love
 You sung it over me and for eternity
 It's written on my heart

Heaven's perfect melody
 The Creator's symphony
 You are singing over me
 The Father's song
 Heaven's perfect mystery
 The king of love has sent for me

And now you're singing over me
 The Father's song

I have heard so many songs
 Listened to a thousand tongues
 But there is one
 That sounds above them all
 [Sounds above them all]
 The Father's song
 The Father's love
 You sung it over me and for eternity
 It's written on my heart

It's Heaven's perfect mystery
 The king of love has sent for me

And now you're singing over me
 The Father's song

The Father's song
 The Father's love
 You sung it over me and for eternity
 It's written on my heart
 [It's written on my heart]
 The Father's song
 The Father's love
 You sung it over me and for eternity
 It's written on my heart
 It's written on my heart
 You sing it over me
 Father

This week, we heard of an answering prodigality: that exquisite story in John 12 of a person's recklessly extravagant love for Jesus. It's as if Mary, sister of the recently raised Lazarus, hears Jesus singing the Father's Song; that she's so caught up in realisation of Jesus's significance that she takes some highly perfumed oil of nard, one of her most precious possessions, and anoints Jesus by pouring it all over him. In what he calls 'this "scent event"', David Ford says Mary hereby indicates her 'recognition of who Jesus is as the anointed one, of his unique presence, and of him laying down his life.'^{vi}

Surely the Lectionary's juxtaposition of these two stories on successive weeks of Lent, is not without profound impact us? One Sunday we are captivated by the prodigal love of God lavished upon us; the next by the prodigal love *for* God that's called out of us. I suppose that like me you have often wondered about what the elder son finally did in the parable of the lost son. At the recent Bible Society supper, some of us heard the answer offered by Peter Williams, Principal of Tyndale House. In his Twitter feed, he suggests that 'The parable ends leaving the Older Brother's response unstated. This is not necessarily because the Older Brother rejects, but because the open ending is an invitation to those like him to respond.'^{vii} How many of us are like the elder Son there? The capacity jealously to point fingers at the little brother is in many of us. But maybe, just maybe, Jesus's genius in the way St Luke tells the tale, is that the unscripted end leaves space for us to fill it in ... seeing ourselves as that elder sibling, invited to respond to God's love with ours. You see, it has been said that 'Sin is a failure to bother to love.'^{viii} If that definition of sin means anything, might it be that sin is the failure to love both God and to love one another?

In this penitential season, you and I are given a fresh opportunity to examine ourselves in that light. After all, which of us resorts comfortably to language of loving God? And even if we do, which of us is much good at it? I'll own up to finding myself echoing the mystic who once said, 'Lord I do not love thee. Lord, I do not even want to love thee. But Lord, how I *want* to want to love thee.' I wonder if Lent is less about giving up a pleasure, and more about accepting a gift. The gift of God's love.

So, let me end with two final points. First, that, as Paul hinted to the Philippians in what was probably his final letter, this capacity to answer God's prodigal love for us with anything like a prodigal love for God is a lifelong venture. It's not about one day arriving – like passing Discipleship A-level and forever enjoying the benefits. It's about the ever so human zig zag of sometimes 'getting' God and other times feeling completely confused and maybe dischuffed by God, *but pressing on*.

And finally, the loving to which Jesus calls us is rarely about anointing some holy One's feet with the most costly scent we can buy. Rather, it's about washing an ordinary one's feet, with the most tender care we can muster. They may be the feet of a loved one who can no longer wash their own feet. They may be the feet of someone before whom others will not kneel because they do not accept that person for who they are. They may be the feet of a refugee from Afghanistan or Ukraine, from racism or homophobia. They may be the feet of someone who's wealthy enough to have their own supply of pure nard but who cannot accept themselves, let alone that others accept them.

Such it is to answer the Father's love with the disciple's; to match that love which is 'heaven's perfect mystery' with the 'justice which is what love looks like in public.'^{ix} So may this Lent face us with *God's* love and draw from us *our* love. And thus may God be known and glorified.

N. P. Uden

3rd April 2022

ⁱ John 3.16

ⁱⁱ II Corinthians 5.19

ⁱⁱⁱ cf Mark 12.33; Deuteronomy 6.5

^{iv} Romans 11.36 New English Bible

^v Watts, Isaac 1674-1748 from the hymn *When I survey the wondrous cross* Rejoice and Sing 217, verse 5

^{vi} Ford, David F. 2021 *The Gospel of John: a theological Commentary* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic page 233

^{vii} Williams, Peter J. Twitter 1st April 2020 Available at <https://twitter.com/DrPJWilliams/status/1245438082897317888>; accessed 2nd April 2022

^{viii} Fr James Keenan (1953-), moral theologian

^{ix} West, Cornell, in a speech at Howard University, Washington DC 18th April 2011