

Sermon preached by John Stott at St John's, Devizes, 18 June, 2017

No doubt when you saw that I was to preach, and realised that the first Lesson was from Paul's Epistle to the Romans you thought "Ah, hear we go. John Stott never preaches on St. Matthew. We are in for more on St Paul". Some of you may be filled with eager anticipation. Others may mutter, "Well. At least he doesn't usually go on too long". But no. I am not in fact going to speak just about St Paul. Nor shall I confine myself to Romans. My theme is God's love manifested in the Cross.

To go back to today's lesson, first Paul tells us of the virtues that flow from suffering, (and he knew suffering from the inside), and closes that "hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us".

Then he goes on: "While we were yet helpless at the right time Christ died for the ungodly ... God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us". Paul follows up in verse 9 of the Epistle to the Phillipians: "This I pray, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and in all judgement". We need to know more about love.

First, what is meant by love? Well, not a sentimental, fuzzy love, nor indeed an erotic love. There is indeed a place for that, since without it none of us would be here today. Paul is writing about "agape", the essence of which is self denial, self-giving. Such love is far from easy. But love isn't easy. As Christ himself demonstrated love entails vulnerability, and as Paul puts it in his great hymn to love in 1st Corinthians 13 "Love suffereth long, and is kind". Such love is as Rowan Williams puts it -- "not a benevolence towards all and a generalised wish for their welfare, but an entirely costly availability in service which gives no room to the superficial interests of the ego".

When Our Lord came, His hearers were confronted by a Messiah who pointed, not backwards to the grand certainties of a kingdom of David, but forwards to -- well, what, exactly? During His ministry it was not easy to be sure -- we can without irreverence wonder if, at the outset, He was sure Himself -- and as it became clearer that He was pointing to the Cross so His mission became more enigmatic, and indeed offensive. A crucified Messiah? Impossible! Judas Iscariot was not alone in his failure to grasp the truth of Our Lord's mission. Peter's loyalty was sorely tested. As St. John has it in the prologue to his

Gospel, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." It was all to have been so different!

The synoptics, Mark in particular, came to a fair grasp of the truth, but it was those children of light Paul and John the Evangelist for whom the centrality of the Cross was illuminated most brightly.

Both men saw the truth of Jesus Christ, that he was indeed the true Messiah, the revelation of God Himself, the Word made flesh. Both men saw the truth of the Cross, that it was the climax, the culmination of Our Lord's work -- not cancelled out but endorsed by the Resurrection. Both men realised that the Cross reveals the true nature of God Himself. In Christ we see the ultimate self-giving of perfect love -- we see the glorious humility of our God. John wrote that Christ came into His glory when He was lifted up onto the cross. This was Christ's "hour" -- "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." (John 12 23-24). Paul links the Old Testament and the New in II Corinthians 4:6 -- "The God who said 'Out of darkness light shall shine' has caused the light to shine in our hearts, the light which is the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ".

Paul's mission to his own people, the Jews, to preach Christ crucified proved to be a mission impossible: not just unsuccessful, downright dangerous. So the flash which enlightened him on the road to Damascus came to enlighten us Gentiles down the centuries.

But is not all this perhaps a trifle glib? On the one hand the Jews: blinded by their past, all but a handful -- though what a handful -- unable to make the leap of faith, most of them opting to remain at ease in the old dispensation: on the other hand we Gentiles, unburdened by Messianic luggage, enlightened by Paul and John and the great cloud of witnesses who followed them, we can see it all, and have no difficulty in holding fast to the faith of Christ crucified.

Really? ... It is not, of course, that easy. The Cross retains its power to offend: a stumbling-block indeed to those who entertained the Messianic hope -- but folly to many in today's secularised society. For one thing, the perhaps disconcerting fact that Christ crucified is the most authentic portrait we have of God. In Bishop Ramsey's great declaration "God is Christlike, and in him is no unChristlikeness whatsoever".

Professor Macquarrie has written “humility and the form of a servant are not disguises of God and not unnatural to him, but of his very essence.” Substitute “Christ” for “God” and most of us would have no difficulty in accepting that. But a humble God? We need something more powerful to believe in. As Bishop J. V. Taylor puts it: “God must be the supreme potentate among the world rulers, the master-mind above all clever controllers. God, unlike us, can do exactly as he pleases in the world at any time. God, like our private wishes, fixes everything. Only get Him on your side and you can’t lose.” A humble God, a vulnerable God, is just not enough for us. But that is our God. There is no escape for us as there was none for Philip: “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father.”

In today’s society how on earth do we preach Christ crucified? Not in here, preaching to the converted, but out there, where Christ is scarcely known and his crucifixion and Resurrection scarcely heard of. To them we cannot preach but teach by our examples. By love, in obedience to Christ’s command in John —“Love one another as I have loved you” — that is, a sacrificial love, a self spending love, a self-emptying love.

We sinners can do it: it is when we are aware: aware of our sinfulness, of our propensity to get things wrong, of our withholding of love or our refusal to accept love, that we shall see Christ’s Passion and Resurrection in its full glory, and like Paul we shall be persuaded, as he told the Romans, that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

Amen