

Sermon for 8th October 2017 (Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity)

Prov. 2. 1-11; Ps. 136. 1-9; 1 John 2. 1-11

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The word “love” in one form or another appears at least fifty times in this comparatively short letter. In every case it is based on the Greek root ‘agape’, which in the New Testament is used to represent the love that God has for the humans He has created. Hence it should also represent the love that we humans have for God and also for our fellow humans, whether relations, friends, strangers, or enemies. How come the writer of this letter was putting such emphasis on “love”? First, perhaps we should consider who the writer was and the circumstances in which he was writing.

The letter-writer was most probably an elder appointed by the apostle John to lead one of the churches that had sprung up in Asia Minor, most likely in Ephesus, where the apostle spent the rest of his life after the sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The elder (who describes himself as such in the second and third epistles of John, and known too as ‘John’) may also have been the scribe who wrote the gospel of John, either at the apostle’s dictation or from notes he made from his long association with the apostle. In any event he was well aware of the contents of the gospel, in which Jesus is recorded as saying to his disciples at the Last Supper: ***“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you all should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*** (And again in the gospel the word used is based on the root ‘agape’. The other word used for “love” is based on the root ‘philo’ which means ‘have affection for’, which is the word Peter used when he replied three times to Jesus’s question ‘do you love me’.)

As to the circumstances, it is thought that both the gospel and the epistle were written around 95 AD, in the first instance for the benefit of those churches in Asia Minor over whom the apostle John had leadership. As the apostle Paul had found in his lifetime, and indeed as is evident in the universal church today, there can be several, many, different interpretations of the christian faith. But in the early days of the newborn church there were some heresies that had to be dealt with to ensure that the good news was not misconstrued. One of these heresies that was evident towards the end of the first century AD was Gnosticism, that is that knowledge of God was all that mattered and that behaviour was therefore of little importance. Further, all that was material was evil, all that was spiritual was good; how then could God take on a human body? One particular heretic at the time even taught that Jesus and Christ were two different beings; Jesus was an ordinary man until his baptism, at which time the heavenly Christ descended on him and remained until the completion of his revelation; then the supernatural Christ left him and Jesus the man was crucified. This heretic, called Cerinthus, had gathered quite a few followers from the churches in and around Ephesus. Hence this first letter of John and its emphasis on the word “love”. The good news of Jesus and of his teaching was summed up in that one

word, “love” - love of God and love of man, and love of both because God first loved us. Our psalmist tonight was aware of the steadfast nature of God’s love for all of his creation, which “endures for ever”; what a fact for which we should be thankful and praise Him!

The letter-writer later deals directly with this particular heresy, in chapter 4, where he declares that only those people who in the spirit confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh are from God. Those who do not believe this have been led away by ‘many false prophets’. This is why part of our creed, as we have sung this evening, states firmly that we ***“believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,”***. And of course our statement of faith is not complete without the clauses following, that Jesus Christ was crucified, dead and buried, rose again and ascended into heaven. If anyone is unable in the spirit to make this confession of faith, the writer says, such a person has the spirit of antichrist. He adds that all wrongdoing is sin, and we are all guilty of this and so have to ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness; but we are assured that ***“we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”*** But he points out that some sin is mortal or “unto death”, by which presumably he means eternal death. He is not specific, but it is implicit I think that such mortal sin involves refusing to believe in Jesus Christ as both human and divine and instead believing in some idol and worshipping that.

There are times, as even the great apostle St Paul admitted, when we may doubt our ability to keep going in faith. In his letter to the Philippians which we heard this morning, Paul also confessed to not already having reached the goal of perfection. In fact none of us may reach perfection until we attain the resurrection from the dead, as Paul put it. In the meantime, we must cling to and obey the commandment to love, in the first place God our Father, and after that our neighbour as ourselves. If we succeed in this, then we should have no fear, because perfect love casts out fear.

Amen.