

At the start of this week, I turned to the two New Testament passages set for today, and I was faced with a conundrum because I didn't know which one to preach from because they're both so good. So, the John passage has the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, and then the passage from Ephesians is St. Paul at his most poetic and profound. Then I noticed that the two passages have similar themes, even similar vocabulary. So, I thought rather than focus on just one, I'll look at them both together and see what words and vocabulary they have in common, and that way, I don't have to choose which one to speak on. I can have both.

So, the most obvious word that these two passages share is love. That's the central theme in both of them. John 3:16 begins, "For God so loved the world", and at the heart of the epistle is this, "God, out of the great love with which He loved us, made us alive together with Christ." All our talk about God must begin with the fact that God is love. There is so much that we don't know about God, but we do know this, that God is love. I once had a very wise church warden called Chris, and if ever there was a disagreement in the parish, he would say, "Well, let's go back to first principles", which was very good advice. So, I've stuck to that. Our thinking goes awry if we don't begin from the right starting point, if we don't have a good first principle. So, it is with spiritual things. If we don't have the first principle that God is love, our thinking goes awry. How much hurt would be avoided in our world if every one of us understood this amazing truth, that God is love, that God loves us? God loves the people that we don't love. God loves the people who are different to us. God loves our enemies. God's love knows no bounds. All of us are loved by God's great love.

I once heard a speaker begin a talk in a very dramatic way. He got out a \$20 note and said, "Who would like this bill? I'm going to give it to somebody." Well, of course, everybody's hand went up, and then he screwed it up. He said, "Who wants this bill?" Still, the same hands went up. Then he threw it on the floor and trod on it. "Who wants this bill?" Still, the hands went up. He said,

"Well, you've learned a great lesson. This \$20 bill keeps its value no matter how much it's screwed up, trodden on, crumpled" he said. It's the same with us. It doesn't matter how many bad decisions we make. It doesn't matter how we're trampled on or crumpled. We are still the same value to God, that God still loves us, whatever state it is that we come to him. We are always loved by him because God's love has no limits. It reaches out to all of us.

God's love embraces the whole world. "God so loved the world", John said, and the text we just heard, John 3:16, was the first text that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke from when he preached his first sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, and his sermons that day are based on this text, would resonate through all his speeches and sermons that he went on to give. He said this on that occasion, "God's love has breadth. It's a big love. It's a broad love. God's love is too big to be limited to a particular race. It is too big to be wrapped in a particularistic garment. It is too great to be encompassed by any single nation. God is a universal God."

The second word that's common to both readings is this: give, or giving. God's love is a broad love and it's a giving kind of love. God so loved the world that He *gave* His only son. St. Paul says, "By grace you have been saved. It is the *gift* of God."

Grace is a word that we use to describe that kind of gift, that kind of love. God's love comes to us before we deserve it. God takes the initiative and reaches out to us where we are. To quote St. Paul again who knew a lot about grace, he said, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God."

I don't know if anybody here has discovered the books of James Herriot. If you haven't, you'd love them knowing how much you like all things English, and it is made into a very good TV series, All Creatures Great and Small. He writes in one of his books about a time he took his wife out for a special anniversary dinner, and they had a lovely meal. It came to the end of the meal, and he realized with horror that he didn't have his wallet with him. So, he said to the staff, "I'm sorry, I

haven't got my wallet." They said, "Don't worry, your boss phoned up before you came, and he paid the bill so you could enjoy your evening."

Well, that's a story about grace, about God getting there first, about God paying any price that needed to be paid for us to be reconciled to Him. God reaches out to us in grace and gives.

The final word that's common to both passages is a bit more complex, but it's to do with elevation, or elevating, or lifting up. That theme is in both of our readings. Jesus says something slightly odd in the gospel. He says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Jesus is referring here to that first reading we heard from the book of Numbers, and I won't go into the detail of it now, but I do want to point out that the word John uses to be lifted up has two meanings.

The first meaning refers to Jesus' death. John talks here and later about Jesus being lifted up on the cross. John knows that Jesus must be lifted up so that we might be saved as we look upon the crucified Jesus and see there the full extent of His love for us that knows no bounds, as we recognize afresh that it was love that held Him there, not nails. This same Greek word for lifted up, *hupsoo*, is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe Jesus' ascent into the heavens. Jesus is lifted up at His ascension into the heavens, to the right hand of God. Peter uses that word to describe Jesus being lifted up to God's right hand. So, St. John here in this gospel reading is deliberately using a word that's associated with Jesus' glorification, His ascent into heaven to describe His ugly death on the cross. The two go together. One could not happen without the other. The way of the cross is also the way of glory, which echoes what I was saying last week about God's foolishness. Remember Paul said, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

Those of us who are being saved know that Jesus suffered on our behalf, that He won our salvation, that we will be raised with Him. There's talk of elevation and lifting up in the epistle. St. Paul says

that "We have been raised up with Jesus and seated with Him in the heavenly places." This word that he uses, elevating, has a double meaning too. Note the tense. We have been *raised* up. We *have* been raised up. The eternal life of which John speaks is a life which begins now. It starts when we are born again. When we are born into a new way of living, empowered by God's spirit. We're lifted out of the way of sin that leads to destruction, to the way of life of the Spirit.

Then of course there's another way in which we're raised up. The hope that is within us is, as it says in the New Testament, "We with all God's people will be raised up on the last day. We will share in His victory over death." Death for us will not have the last word. Jesus walked the way of the cross and it led to His crown of glory, and that's the path we are called to follow. We worship a God who loves us, who gave Himself for us and calls us to walk with Him so that we might be raised up with Him. Amen.