

## SERMON AT ST MICHAEL'S CORNHILL – TRINITY 2 2012

How can we know that God loves us?

The Hebrew people knew because of rumour – the experience of the patriarchs, the assurances of the prophets.

Although the presence of God was affirmed by the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, it was often thought that God was remote and basically hostile.

In the Christian tradition there is one thing that convinces us of God's love, and that is God's willingness to take on our human flesh and dwell amongst us.

Of course if Jesus of Nazareth is merely a person of unimpeachable goodness, a moral teacher of immense stature, that in itself is not significant.

But if he is God in the flesh – our creator and the second Person of the Sacred Trinity, that makes all the difference, because, as the first reading today says, *hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us.*

God himself.

It is staggering, and the only hope for sinful, backsliding humanity.

God has joined us here, in this.

This is the motivation for the whole of the Church's life – not the striving to meet an impossible ideal, but our acknowledgement, our apprehension of the mystery of the incarnation.

That God's own Son should come to earth, not to lift us out of it but to join us in this world.

And to invite us into a dynamic relationship with the God who is love.

The heart of God himself, in a man.

Last Friday was the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

We all understand the imagery when the heart is mentioned in connection with relationships.

Anglicans are used to dismissing the image of the Sacred Heart as an extreme manifestation of misguided Roman Catholic piety.

This is understandable when you consider many of the artistic representations of that mystery.

Writers of obituaries often say that our hearts go out to the bereaved.

Here, God's heart in Jesus goes out to us.

God actually wants us to be at one with him.

And for this to be a possibility, for this to be a reality for us, he opens his heart to us in Jesus.

Many people will find this idea difficult to cope with, not because of the imagery itself, but because deep down they believe that in order for us to be right with God we have to be worthy.

The image of the open heart ignores any quest for uprightness, and the torn body of the Redeemer ignores the pleas of the righteous in its thirst for every human creature.

In St John on Bethnal Green, right on top of the Central line station there is a large image of Jesus over the altar.

It looms over the church in a slightly menacing way.

But the figure has its arms extended in welcome.

Over the image, in large gold letters are the words, "Come unto me."

It's a moving figure, because it reminds us that the way is open to us.

All we have to do is respond to that and we shall find rest for our souls.

Often people tell us that the christian way is a hard one.

This will be so not because our God is remote and makes the way to him an obstacle course.

It will be so because the way has been opened by a birth, by blood and sweat and tears, and by a death.

God himself.

God's heart, for us.

What we are called to do as Christian people is to keep God's commandments.

As today's reading from 1 John says, *and this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another.*

This can easily and appropriately be translated as learning to love and worship God and to build community – true pillars of the Church's life.

It is not a call to action some time in the future – it is a call to action now.

We are called not simply to acknowledge the gift of God's open heart; we are also called to *lay down our lives for the brethren.*

An outrageous suggestion on the face of it, but the writer tells us not to *love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.*

Through baptism we are *members one of another*, so how can the love of God be seen in us if we do not love one another?

And if we cannot love our brothers and sisters in Christ, how can we pretend to love those not of the faith, but for whom Christ lived and died also?

The call to live the Christian life, to practise the faith, is an immediate one, and not something to be fulfilled later, beyond this life even.

Here and now we are confronted with the call to a great banquet, as were those invited to the man's banquet in today's Gospel reading.

Those who have previously accepted the invitation now discover more pressing engagements.

They will lose their opportunity and find their place filled by others.

They show that their own religious system is more important and pressing than the gracious calling of God.

Those who listened to Jesus must have been affronted by this story, because it implied that all those they regarded with contempt – the beggars, tax collectors and sinners were the recipients of the invitation to feast.

Those in the highways and hedges are the gentiles.

For those who believed that they were the chosen of God to the exclusion of others this was the ultimate insult.

Comparisons with the Eucharistic life of the Church are inevitable.

This is the heart and centre of our life.

Here the rumour of God's love and presence is made a reality.

For our faint hearts it is underlined again and again.

Because this is so – and we recognise it – we put our energies into it.

We commit to it, wherever we are, for it is our lifeline to God and the source from which our communal life radiates.

Here, again and again the heart of God opens to us.

From this banquet there is no exclusion except by individual choice.

Our love for God and for each other compels us to be here.

The only disqualifying sin is to find preoccupations that are more attractive than the friendship of God.