

Pentecost 10
29/7/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 4:7-12
Psalm 145
John 6:1-13

God's unnecessary love

In a sentence:

God does not 'have' to love us but does, unnecessarily

'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God' (4.7).

I want to unpack today why the church holds that the love which is from God – of which the gospel speaks – and the love to which we are called to demonstrate, is *unnecessary* love.

To the unbaptised mind this is clearly wrong. Surely, What the world needs now, is love sweet love, because Love makes the world go around, and so All you need is love: the Love which lifts us up where we belong. Even the church's foundational texts – from which we have heard this morning – seem to contradict this: God is love, God loves us, let us love one another.

How, then, could love be unnecessary?

For the church to say that love is unnecessary is to say that the love *which is our particular concern* here – 'gospel' love – is *unnatural* love. *Natural* things are *necessary* things. We can rely on what is natural, because it unfolds predictably: apples fall from trees, very cold water freezes, nobody gets out alive. The love about which the gospel speaks is not predictable in the way of nature. It is in this sense it is not necessary love.

What this means is that the love of which John writes is not *familiar* love – the love which comes and flows naturally. And so, when he lays love out for reflection, he doesn't point to mothers or to lovers or to the best of friends. Rather, John points to the cross: '...In *this* is love, *not* that we loved God but that *he* loved us and *sent his Son* to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (4.10).

This is, again, incomprehensible to the unbaptised mind, for where is the natural love in this? Is it not a ghastly, bloody God who requires atoning sacrifices in the first place? How is it that God cannot simply *forgive*? Would *that* not be true love?

All of this would be 'necessary' love: sensible and understandable love. But when it comes to joining the cross and the love of God, we *cannot* say that even the cross itself was necessary. All theories of the atonement which suggest that God was too righteous to forgive the unrighteous, so that there was some deep law which required blood, make the cross necessary and either tie God's hands to a law outside of God or split God into two parts, one part demanding a price which the other pays.

But the cross is not *magical* in this way. It is not an *incantation* or formula which brings salvation; it is not the *necessary* key which unlocks God's heart. If the cross is not necessary in this way, then neither can any love associated with it be a natural, necessary love.

In fact, the cross is not, in the first instance, God's work at all. It is *ours*. And it is ours – we imagine – as a *necessary* work: 'is it not better that the one should die than that we should lose everything?' Do the gods not require the expulsion of the blasphemer? Must he not die at our hands?

The cross is – in the first act of the drama – a work of '*un-love*' if Jesus is not a blasphemer but the messenger of God. The cross is necessary *for us* because in Jesus we meet a God we cannot bear: 'What the world needs now,, is not love, sweet love, but less Jesus. But, while necessary for us, the cross was not necessary for God. The ministry of Jesus and his call to follow was open to the possibility that people might *actually* follow – that the cross would *not* be necessary. (If not, it was all just play-acting).

In what sense, then, does God 'send' the Son and the cross, given that that is where it all ended up? God sends the cross *in the resurrection*. *Our* word to God – the cross – becomes *God's* word to us in the resurrection: God's Yes to our No.

And this is the unnecessary, unnatural thing. It is not the case merely that God 'loves' us but needs the cross to get past what is unlovely about us. The cross *is* the unloveliness of the human creature. This is our godlessness – and so our lack of humanity – that we employ such things as crosses and that we sometimes find ourselves on them. God does not so much *use* the cross to save as *overcome* the cross and our shame in crucifying the Lord of glory.

But it is not obvious that God will do this. John declares 'God is love' as an answer to the question of Easter Saturday: What *Will* God Do? The unnecessary, unnatural, unlawful thing God does is raise Jesus and *return him* to the disciples (in person) and to Israel (in preaching) with the words, *Peace* be with you. Not a sword of divine wrath but an offer of peace.

This is love: God's devotional persistence, *despite* the cross: unnecessary, unearned love – a *breaking* of the law rather than an observance of it.

The resurrection becomes a revelation of God's power in relation to the cross. Here we see God's willingness to embrace and use the least lovely of all things – even the murder of God himself on a cross – in pursuit of those God loves. This is not *necessary* love. It is so much more than that. It is gloriously *unnecessary*, because it springs from the very heart of God. The *only* question which matters is whether God will set right what is not right among us. If the answer is no, then surely we are all lost. If it is yes, then it is the God's identification with the cross *by overcoming the cross* which proves it. We hope in this God because this God has *overcome* the cross.

And the love commanded of us? 'If we love one another,' John says, 'God lives in us and *his* love is perfected in us' – *God's* love is perfected in us. This perfected love is not the easy love which – if we are lucky – comes naturally, although that too is of God. The love which is not natural but which is *commanded* is that which loves as God does. This is our calling, because it is a calling to become like the one who calls. Love where and how God does. Love where love is not sought. Love where love is not expected. Love where it is not deserved. Love where it would seem love will be wasted and so is unnecessary, not required.

Such love is difficult because we cannot see where it goes, whether even it will go anywhere. It was not different for God in Jesus *and yet* God loved, and here we are 2000 years later.

‘Beloved,’ John writes, ‘since God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us’.

Let us, then, become lovers after the love of *God*. That is all that is necessary.

By way of response, a prayer of confession..

*We offer thanks and praise, O God,
because you have created and sustained us
and all things.*

*And yet, we confess that in thought, word and deed
we have not loved you or our neighbours
as ourselves.*

*Forgive us when we allow only that love
extends only to the familiar and easy,
when the charity which begins in the home
also ends there.*

*Forgive us when we imagine that your love is like ours,
that you love us because we are deserving of love,
that there is nothing in us which needs to be overcome,
nothing which will be revealed as shadow
by the light of your love.*

*Forgive us the lovelessness which says No when a Yes was possible,
which withholds what is excess to our need,
which is unnecessarily jealous,
destructively envious.*

*O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that,
with you as our ruler and guide,
we may so pass through things temporal,
that we lose not the things eternal; [Proper 17]
just so, gracious God, have mercy on us...*