

Sunday next before Lent 2021

We have heard the story of the Transfiguration where the disciples hear a voice from the cloud that says 'This is my Son, the beloved.' A heavenly voice said a similar thing earlier in this ministry, at his baptism. Mark has 16 chapters and exactly half way through there is a turning point as Jesus anticipates his end and the drama moves inexorably towards Jerusalem. It is at this point that he goes up a mountain, is transfigured and hears again a voice. It reminds him that his whole identity and purpose is tied up with him being the Son of his heavenly Father and fundamental to that Sonship is the assurance that he is loved, the beloved, the loved one. Because he knows he is loved, and because he knows that that love was there before all things and will remain through and to the end of all things, he knows also that it is Love that, matters above everything else. All the religion, morality and spiritual experience taught and evidenced by Moses and Elijah counts for nothing if it is not a reflection of, a consequence of and an outworking of the Love that is at the heart of all things.

So St Paul's great hymn to love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. 'And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity.' Moses brought divine revelation and knowledge, Elijah was the first for the great prophets, but, says St Paul now 'we know only in part, and we prophesy in part'. 'Now we see through a glass darkly (in a mirror, dimly) but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully'.

St Paul and Jesus were in fundamental agreement that the certainties of what was right and wrong provided by the Law and the Prophets, Moses and Elijah, our Old Testament, were not to be treated as cast iron certainties but as foreshadowings of the full knowledge that was to come – and just as the two OT figures faded away in the presence of the greater light who is Christ, so their teachings move from foreground to background in the light of the greater commandments given by him that can be summed up in the one word, Love – the Love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

The problem for us is that in some ways its easier to negotiate the world with a guide book that tells you what not to do, what to avoid – thou shalt not do this, don't do that. It's clear – or it is until the culture changes and you have no idea why you're not supposed to do some things: eat pork, mix materials in your clothing, marry your late brother's wife (Henry VIII tripped up on that one – hence the Church of England). But 'love you neighbour as yourself' doesn't tell me who I can marry, whether I can divorce, when I'm allowed to have sex and with whom. We need a bit more guidance and the New Testament and the Christian tradition help to provide it.

The Church of England, as you know, has been wrestling with questions of marriage, divorce, same-sex intimate relationships, gender roles and identities for a good many years – and for the past few has been engaged in a process called 'Living in Love & Faith'. There is a book, a course, a vast number of resources, learned papers, personal testimonies, Scriptural exegeses – you name it, it's all there on the website. You and I have been invited to be part of this conversation – and as a contribution to that we will be having three groups during Lent that will be following a five week study course on 'Living in Love and Faith'. Please see this month's Chimes for more details. Some people are worried that their deeply held convictions in these matters won't receive a fair hearing – either they'll get upset or they'll upset others and that would be best avoided.

Well may be. But what I have seen over the years in my friendships with a very wide range of fellow members of the Church of England (and other denominations) is that there are sincere, devout and good-hearted Christian people who have in different ways struggled often at great personal cost with these matters who have come to different conclusions about what they believe God is calling the church to teach and give its blessing to. We are either going to have to learn to live with one another (pardon the metaphor) or we are going to have to separate into different households. To extend that metaphor, we are perhaps now in need of some marital counselling to decide whether we have a future together or need to part. We need at every level of the church to talk and we need

to do so in a 1 Corinthians 13 kind of way – with Love, yes, of course, but also with a recognition that Love doesn't always have obvious answers, that 'I know only in part' and only Then will I know fully – oh, and boy there will be some surprises Then. But notice the knowledge that we will have then is not a knowledge about things. That ultimate knowledge that we are headed towards in eternity is not about whether we had the right theology or the right moral judgments or the right opinions. Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then will I know fully, even as I have been fully known.' What matters in the end is not what we know but who we know; it is not that I understand, or think I understand, all the mysteries of God; it's that the divine mystery understands and fully know me – and that's when we go up the mountain and hear the words uttered, 'You are my child, the beloved', one who is deeply loved. That in the end is what we will know and it is all that we will ever need.