



**Sermon: - 4<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

## **Family Values**

*If we truly understand how much God loves us, all other loves pale into insignificance – even the strongest ties of family are as nothing compared to the love God has for us.*

Today we are going on a journey. It's a biblical journey, and it begins with today's psalm, a version of which we sang earlier. It's a well loved psalm, interpreted in many songs and hymns, speaking of God's care for, and knowledge of, us from the very moment of conception. The psalmist tells us that God knits us together in our mother's womb. He watches over us as we grow and develop, woven in the depths of the earth. It's an amazing thought. He fills our lungs with breath and causes our heart to beat. He gives us consciousness and understanding and we are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made. The image the psalmist gives us is of a God who fashions us intricately, loves us extravagantly, cares for us eternally and to the ends of the earth. It is also clear from this imagery that we are God's masterpiece. As we discovered with the children in the holiday club, we are the apex of his creation, his pièce de résistance which he completed as his final act of creativity. He watches over us with the attention a mother gives to her newborn baby. The Psalmist paints a picture of a God who is everywhere, above all and beyond all; Almighty and all powerful, yet who knows us intimately; holds us with the tenderness of a mother, cares for us and sustains us with protectiveness of a father.

The Jeremiah passage takes up this creative theme with the image of the potter shaping the clay, and this is the next step of our journey. This passage is not the story of our creation and birth, nor does it speak of the inward relationship that we have with God, as in the Psalm. This passage deals with creatures who are adult, grown, and capable of acting with free will and under their own volition. However, once again we have the sense that we cannot escape from God, that he is ever present. That could be an uncomfortable thought - he is watching over us, but he watches with care and compassion and only with our best interests in mind. In him we live and move and have our being, and in him we find fulfilment. So God once again affirms his care for us. If we become warped and bent away from his purpose, he will not discard us but rather will take us, remake and reshape us until we resemble the original picture of us that he had in his mind. If the Psalm describes our relationship with God, this passage describes how God will deal with us in our relationship to the world. If we don't get it right he will work with us to salvage something from the mess.

And then, the final stage on our journey, we come to the gospel. And at this point our journey takes the most shocking and unexpected turn. Is this the God that we have seen in the first two passages? The loving and nurturing God of the Psalm? The caring and involved God of Jeremiah? A friend of mine told me about her chaplaincy in a local primary school and the time she was telling the story of Moses and the 10 plagues which God sent on the Egyptians. One little boy reacted strongly, "No, Mrs Kyle, no! That's not the God you tell us about every week!" This is a common problem, to find a disparity between the God of the Old Testament, who often seems violent and demanding, and the God of the New, whose modus operandi is love, love, love, as that little boy very astutely realised. But in our readings today we have a reversal of that. In today's readings it's the God of the Old Testament who is loving and caring, and the God of the New who seems violent and cruel. Who demands that we hate our families! But, just as that little boy realised that there was

more to this story than he was hearing, so we can affirm this morning that this cannot be the whole story. The journey can't surely end with this? Perhaps the clue here is to regard the other two passages as the foundation on which this one is built, the context from which it springs, and the frame without which the picture does not make sense. In these three readings today, the bible becomes its own commentary and interpreter. We need the picture of the loving and caring God from the Old Testament to enable us to wrestle with and understand the passage in the New. Against the background of a nurturing God, what can we make of the Gospel passage?

I think there are two things we need to bear in mind as we approach this passage. The first is that Jesus was a first century Jew, with the thought processes, assumptions and idiosyncrasies of a first century Jew; how else could he have communicated with his culture? How else would he have communicated with his culture? So it's important to ask, what was that culture like, and how did communication happen within it? It was a largely oral culture; little was written down. And so forceful language and exaggeration and hyperbole were used to make a point, and to ensure that the message would stick in the minds of the hearers. And there is good reason to believe that this is the technique which Jesus was using here. While this passage may not make immediate sense to us because of the exaggeration and hyperbole, to a first century Jew it would not have made sense without it. In fact we still see the remnants of this practice today in Eastern cultures which are much more demonstrative and effusive than our own. So Jesus used this extreme metaphor to convey his message to his audience. 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.' Basically he was exaggerating to make a point; this is what following me is going to cost you. This is how much God is worthy of your love.

Hate is a strong word, but it is this extravagance of language which indicates how important this is. Our love for God should make other loves pale into insignificance.

The other significant factor in understanding this passage is the way in which the 1st Century Jews understood family. The Old Testament family was close-knit, and family loyalty was very strong, above and beyond everything else. Family honour and respect was high. The strength of this family bond can be seen even today and I'm sure is one of the things which has helped to maintain the identity of the Jewish nation throughout the centuries without country or homeland. A nation with a weaker sense of itself would have long since dispersed to become assimilated into other nations but the Jewish nation has survived through untold and unimaginable adversity. And at the heart of this strength is the family.

Against this background, you can see that Jesus was playing on this sense of family love and loyalty to indicate the extravagance of the love that we would feel for God if we only truly understood all that he has done for us. Truly understood his love for us; the care with which he brought us into being and watches over us, illustrated in the psalm; the commitment he gives to our continued well-being, illustrated in the Jeremiah passage. Since he has created us and shaped us, given us life and breath, instilled in us the gifts and talents with which we earn a living, relax, enjoy life; as it is from God that we receive the ability to love and to laugh, then do we not owe him our first and foremost allegiance? Beyond and above all else? Even family? Lord Byron once said: "There are four questions of value in life. What is sacred? Of what is the spirit made? What is worth living for and what is worth dying for? The answer to each is the same. Only love." I would add to that and say that the answer to these questions is not just "love", but God's love.

The Bible clearly teaches us to love and honour our families. Indeed our families give us life and shape. But then how much more should we love and honour the God who has

loved us even before our parents did, given us life in an even more fundamental way than our parents have and who shapes us in a fuller way than even our parents could.

Jesus was exaggerating to make the point that his hearers should give that familial allegiance to God first, before their own flesh and blood.

Even taking into account the exaggeration to make a point, Jesus is leaving us no doubt that the cost of discipleship may be high, and it is well that we count the cost before we set out on the path. But here our journey comes full circle as we return to where we began with the psalm which shows us that God loves us with a mother's love, and Jeremiah which shows us that God loves us with a father's strength. God's love for us is shown in that Jesus came to heal the breach that we had made between humanity and God, and ultimately the cost of our salvation is higher than any price we might pay. And so when we count the cost of following Jesus it is that price with which we must balance the scales.

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