

St Brandon's, Sermon for ASH WEDNESDAY, 14th February 2018

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

God Loves Us

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This year Ash Wednesday coincides with Valentine's Day. [I think its still legitimate to eat chocolate today ... ?!]

Chocolates, red roses, cards and romantic gestures. Ah! the pain and joy these can bring: Valentine's Day epitomises the time of year when many people's hopes and fears are focussed on the question,

"Does he, or doesn't he (or she) love me?

Why?

Why not?

What's not lovable in me?

What is lovable in me?

I imagine many of us *have* been through times when those questions dominated our lives, even if navigating through romantic relationships might not be where we are at the moment.

And when our relationships are based on a love for each other that is not romantic love, we are still vulnerable to the lurking question "Do they or don't they love me?

Am I loved and lovable?"

We have a huge – perhaps insatiable – need for reassurance that we are loved by those who matter most to us.

Huge emotional pain when our love for another is rejected, betrayed, or in other ways held cheap; when the object of our love dies and can no longer receive our love and respond in love.

Despite the inevitable pain that is the cost of loving another, we go on investing in loving relationships, and rightly so but human love is fallible.

However loved and lovable we might be in the eyes of another, they are not the ultimate source of love.

We must not make them responsible for our entire sense of worth and being loved; that would not be fair, no-one can be *obliged* to love another, it doesn't work like that; only God can truly love us unconditionally, and unendingly.

That does not make the hopes and longings expressed in valentine cards necessarily any less genuinely meant, it just cannot be more than *human* love, even the very best of human love.

So here we are on Ash Wednesday, which opens us into the season of Lent, which can feel like the season of asking the same valentine's day questions - "Does he, or doesn't he love me? Why? Why not? What is lovable in me?" - asking these questions about our relationship to God.

The imagery of 'love' and 'sin' dominate the liturgy in Lent, preying on our uncertainties.

And what on earth do we expect we are saying, or newcomers to church are thinking, when we say every service in Lent

"The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart God will not despise."

Are we meant to rejoice in that?

Joel, the Old Testament reading today, said the Lord tells us to come to him, "*with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing*".

From my experiences of human love, that sounds horribly like God is angry with me, the headmaster style God is withdrawing the favour of his love, breaking my heart?

But that cannot be the right message and the right response because everything tells me that God loves us unconditionally, and unendingly, and He is faithful and consistent in this no matter what. And us includes me, as well as you.

Lent Survival Kit tool number one:

Be confident of God's unwavering, unceasing, non-negotiable love. Think on it, believe it, own it, live it – whatever it takes to make it as sure and real as possible, as the foundation for the Lent journey.

God holds us and will not drop us.

So what's the problem?

The problem is us. We are no more capable of being fully and enduringly loving toward our God than we are towards each other, no matter how hard we try, and how nearly we succeed, we cannot because we are human and fallible.

God knows that, and he does not love us any the less despite that, but every moment we stray he longs for us to keep returning to Him.

The dynamic is not one of us being rejected by God but of us rejecting him.

The solution is the task of Lent: to open our hearts further to his love, and discover the response in us is one of wanting to be be our *best* selves for him, to be nearer and closer to him.

It is not God that breaks our heart, its we who break our own heart – willingly (albeit painfully) because and when we realise how much we love God yet fall short of who we would love to be, for and with God. Then, and only then, are we ready to be healed; God binds up the brokenhearted.

But never does God stop loving us; nor does he want us to be broken, he wants to bind up our wounds but how can he until we ask him?

And how can we ask him, until we see our brokenness?

Tool two in our Lent Survival kit: Scripture and prayer.

These are the tools given to us to explore, through God's holy Word and through our interaction with God, where our brokenness lies.

Sometimes we know we have lost the way and done wrong knowingly; sometimes we think we are better than we are – hence Jesus's caution about being hypocritical: fooling ourselves and others to think us more holy than we are.

Holding these sort of passages in prayer are like holding a mirror, trying to get us to look clearly at ourselves.

Or to look honestly at the evidence around us as to what we value: where do we put our energy?

Is it into storing up treasures on earth? *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"*

The word 'heart' is used in scripture as the seat of life or strength – one's entire emotional nature and understanding. This is the totality of our being that God wants us to return to him, nothing less than our entire emotional nature and understanding. Not to resist him with hardened hearts as Pharaoh had, that are turned away from God but turning back, with new, softened and opened hearts, full of contrition: that desire to put right and start again, to make clean. And to do it every time we become aware we have strayed, and to become more attuned to seeing how and where we stray.

As we journey through Lent it is towards the crucifixion and resurrection. That ultimate memorial to the love Jesus has for us: the wonder that he loves me That Much that he died for me and for you; and the testimony to God's love for Jesus in the resurrection. All that, too, is the same mix of love and pain and joy and sorrow that exercises our knowledge of the love of God, and helps open us up to it.

I lay the emphasis on self, not because I am unaware that we live in a broken and hurting world, or that the call we hear in Joel was to the whole people of Israel, to turn as a nation back to God, but I emphasise self because all we do starts with and flows from our hearts – from that bit we secrete within us.

Unless we can know ourselves, our weaknesses and our gifts, and accept that God loves us because and despite that, we cannot start to be healed, and ready to put ourselves and our needs aside for the sake of another.

Unless we can die to self - be self-forgetful, we are not going to see others with right motives and engage with the world with loving hearts.

Our almsgiving and actions need to start and come from our hearts and our relationship with God, and return us there.

So my desire for this Lent is to know more fully, the fullness of God's love for me, and let that melt and re-form my heart.

Amen