

Lent 4B Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2: 1-10; John 3:14-21

In John's Gospel we read about God's great love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." That is amazing love! A free gift! A love totally unmerited by us! The ultimate example of love! The kind of love that should take our breath away! It is the pattern and model of the kind of love that we, as Christians, are called to show in our lives. And it is offered to every one of us.

Does that great love surprise you? Being loved is always a surprise. The very fact that someone chooses to love us is exciting. It supports us in what we do. It gives us new insight into our value as a human. Even when we recognize our self worth, being loved is still a startling experience. "Are we worthy of such devotion?" we wonder. "Will it last?"

It is no wonder then, that being loved by God comes as a great surprise to us. Paul says that we are created in Christ for good works. God has crafted us in God's very image. We are "works of art", part of a great masterpiece crafted by a genius artist. How hard it is to take in just how great that love is! Yet there it is.

How much does God love us? God loves us enough to have crafted us in that wonderful likeness. Not one mold, but each unique and wonderful. Each part of God's plan. What love that is! It is genuine and real: the kind of love that resulted in a work of love so great that it is beyond our imagination. The kind of love that transforms whomever it touches!

Love brings joy and happiness. It also brings vulnerability. Love is transformative. It is the Christian way. God's love offers us salvation. It is a gift from God, not something we earn. During Lent we reflect on God's love to us. We prepare ourselves for Easter and the resurrection.

As we draw close to Holy week we must begin to ask ourselves, how has God's love transformed my life? How do I experience the love of God? How is the cross a sign of God's love? Lent is a time to reflect on God's great love. Yet love offered is not necessarily love accepted. The suitor can be spurned. We can say yes or no. And yes! There is a personal cost to every one of us.

Loving always comes at a cost to self. For the love so freely given to us, calls us in turn to come into relationship with that loving God, and to reach out in love to our neighbour. Paul takes every opportunity to help us to understand that salvation is a free gift from God, a love gift. It is not something we have earned. It is not something we deserve. It is grace, freely given. He also emphasizes that, free though it may be it is not without cost.

Opening ourselves to the gift of God's love means that we cannot avoid the experience of the cross. Opening ourselves to the gift of God's love means opening ourselves to the possibility of suffering as well as to the probability of great joy. We just don't expect that in our lives. When we choose to follow Christ, we expect that it will mean an end to suffering.

That it will mean that somehow we have tapped into a magical way of avoiding anything bad happening. It will all work out like the Harlequin romance where every story has its happy ending.

The people of Israel thought that to follow in God's way would mean an end to suffering and tragedy. They discovered differently. As the time in the wilderness went on and on, they began to see that just because it's free, does not mean it is without cost.

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? They asked of Moses. For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food. What they are saying is that the manna, which God has provided, the free gift of God's grace, is not enough. They expected more.

Are we ever like them? Do we lose patience on the way to the Promised Land? It simply does not happen fast enough for us. Or the way we expected it to. Aren't we rather prone to wanting instant gratification for our every desire? We don't expect to meet with any adversity or trouble on the way.

The cross for the Christian is a sign of contradiction. What was once a sign of public disgrace becomes a sign of vulnerability and love, the great love of a great God. The contradiction also arises because it came about through the sacrifice of Christ. It brings about suffering, but without it there can be no resurrection. The cross, a symbol of death, is for the Christian a symbol of resurrection.

"When I am lifted up from the earth" Jesus says in the Gospel, "I shall draw all people to myself" Moses lifted up the brass serpent in the wilderness and all those who looked at it were healed. Jesus was lifted up.

All who believed were given eternal life. The cross is a call to wholeness in Christ. Belief in the crucified Lord calls us to repentance and healing. It calls us to respond, to respond with love for our neighbour.

Not the neighbour I choose to love, mind you. Not the one whose culture and race match mine, but the one God calls us to serve. My neighbour is the addicted, the perverted, the selfish, the corrupted. My neighbour is the one of another faith. My neighbour is the one person in the parish that I just cannot stand. And what does God call us to do about that????

Our great God who gave us such amazing love, now calls each one of us to extend that love to others. Is there someone that you need to be reconciled with? What difference would it make in your own life and the person's life if reconciliation were to happen? What difference would it make in the life of the parish? That is a question that only each one of us can answer. Through service to our God we can fulfill that call to love others as we in turn love God.

The realization that we are really loved by God is difficult to grasp. Yet the signs of God's love are all around us. The humanity of Christ is God's fullest sign of love for us. That Christ should live and die as one of us is truly an amazing sign. If we believe it, this sign should support, thrill, excite and re-create us. For my friends we are truly loved, and our cost is to love everyone in return. Amen.