

Morningside

12/3/2017

John 3:16. "God loved the world so much that he gave his only son".

"Crooked Hillary". "Crooked Hillary" "Crooked Hillary". He said it over and over again. And people believed him. Despite the FBI denials, despite the absence of good evidence, despite the matter never coming to court, they believed him and shouted "Lock her up!". All because whenever you heard "Hillary" you also heard "crooked". It was the same in Nazi Germany. Whenever Dr. Goebbels spoke about Jews, it was always "Jewish vermin". In large sections of the Press when you see the word "benefits" you know the next word will be "scroungers".

Word association can do a good deal of harm. I wonder if word association might also do a great deal of good. Our text is John chapter 3 verse 16. "God loved." This morning forget the rest of the verse. If we could learn to put these words together all the time. The word "God" and the word "love". So that whenever you hear the word "God" the word that comes to your mind immediately is "love". If we were able to do that – if we were able to do nothing else in my 16 months with you – if we were able to learn to put the two words together all the time – "God and "love", then my time here will have been good for you and for me.

But everyone finds it so hard. I had only been one day in my new appointment at Morningside when I was facing the terrible questions that never go away. "If God is a God of love why do bad things happen?" There cannot be anyone here who does not tremble at that question, just as there cannot be anyone here who knows the answer. But part of the problem – certainly only part – is that the god whom we often worship is not real. A God who sits far away and arbitrarily sends one to car accident and one to fame and fortune does not exist. A God whose will would be for children to be abused - such a God would be a monster.

When I was a young minister in Greenock the local headmaster told me that he had promised never to walk into a church again after a landslide engulfed a school in Wales and 116 children and 28 adults died. Who would want to worship a god whose will is to harm people? Not me; and not, I hope, you. Sometimes we are looking at the wrong God. God loves; and everything that causes pain causes pain to God. God loves. It is nonsense to say that motor neurone disease or dementia is the will of God. Everything God does God does in love. God creates in love, God rules in love, God judges in love. The two words go together. God. Love.

But for many of us – perhaps most of us – this morning that is unusually difficult. Unusually difficult because we are Scottish. Indeed, we're not very good at thinking or speaking about love at all. Two weekss ago my wife and I had a short break in Venice. At the airport coming home Irene had Airport Assistance, and the man with her wheelchair asked me how I had enjoyed Venice" "I was transported by the city", I exclaimed. "I fell in love with my wife all over again". "Aye", he replied. "There's a down side to everything!"

There is good evidence that Scottish people are not good at thinking of God in terms of love, far less holding the two words together; and that evidence is in my hand. This is "Scottish Religious Poetry – an Anthology". There are many good things in it. It begins with a long poem by St Columba about the magnificence of creation. There are several poetic expressions of the search for faith. The terrible judgmentalism of the Scottish Church is here in full: once you have read Sorley MacLean's bitter "A Highland Woman" you will not forget it. But there is precious little about love and the love of God. The one true genius of Scottish love poetry is only represented here by one poem: and while "Holy Willie's Prayer" is a splendid poem it does not help you to believe that God is love

There is a poem here by the Scottish Jew A C Jacobs which expresses much of the cool sceptical spirit which is characteristic of so much Scottish religion which does not want to think of God and love in the same sentence

*Lord, from this city I was born in
I cry unto you whom I do not believe in:*

*(Spinoza and Freud among others saw to that)
Show me the place in which I started
Where I have gone wrong*

*Descend neither in Kirk nor synagogue
Nor university nor pub*

*But on a handy summit like Ben Lomond
Make me a new Sinai, and please God
Can we have less of the thou-shalt-not?*

Very Scottish, and no attempt to hold the words God and love together. Would you believe that the best representative of the kind of poem I long for in this book is by the author "A Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1650": and proof that beautiful things can be designed by committees is in this poem

*The Lord's my shepherd I'll not want
He makes me down to lie*

Being the metrical version of the 23rd psalm, a psalm infused with the love of God.

It is not easy to hold together God and love. Partly because of suffering and evil; and partly because of Scottish reticence. But we must get there. And we will. For we will get there side by side with Jesus. Listening to him, walking with him. Watching him. As we do that we will find what love is; and we will find who God is.

Listening to him Listening to him telling us to love our enemies and to pray for them.. Listening to him telling a story about a man with two sons and the prodigal returning home after a life of waste: and we hear that the father runs to meet him and throws his best robe around him and cries "Rejoice, for my son who was lost is found". Listening to him saying "Love one another as I have loved you". Listening to him and thinking that we might be hearing the very words of God himself.

Watching him putting his hands on the dreadful skin of a leper and healing him. Watching him looking at a rich young ruler with love. Watching him taking bread and fish and meeting the needs of a hungry crowd. Watching him on another occasion taking bread again; and this time breaking it and saying "This is my body". Watching that body being given into the hands of cruel men and being crucified: with the words "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing". Watching him and thinking that we might be seeing the life of God in human form. It is not by causing our suffering that God loves us: it is by refusing to escape from it.

"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us; and we beheld his glory". The glory is the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ, and it is the glory of love. The word "God" and the word "Love" come together in him. You are to look at Jesus and see love: you are to look at Jesus and see God. It is the most important word association we can make: and the nearer we can come to listening to Jesus and to watching him, the more possible it is to see that God and love do indeed belong together.

As I said at the beginning, if we could learn to put these words together all the time. The word "God" and the word "love". So that whenever you hear the word "God" the word that comes to your mind immediately is "love". If we were able to do that – if we were able to do nothing else in my 16 months with you – if we were able to learn to put the two words together all the time – "God and "love", then my time here will have been good for you and for me.

There is a book called "The Christlike God" Its opening sentence is one to remember: "God is Christlike; and in him is no unChristlikeness at all"

Amen