SUNDAY BEFORE THE ELEVATION OF THE CROSS St John. 3: 13-17

Today we look at a text from the Gospel of St John, which for me at least used to glare down at me in my childhood from billboards in large black, red and yellow letters in front of non-conformist churches: “For God so loved the world that He gave his only son that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” The colours seemed so arresting and threatening almost and so far from the heart of this wonderful verse. It is interesting that on this Sunday, namely the Sunday before the Exaltation of the Cross, the Lord’s words do not dwell directly on his crucifixion but only by analogy with Moses’ lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness. The event is recorded in the Old Testament Book of Numbers chapter 21 and records how the people became impatient with God and their leader Moses and railed against both of them for bringing them into the wilderness where there is no food or water but only the ‘worthless food’ provided by God. So the Lord sent fiery serpents among them and they were bitten and many died. The people came to Moses and confessed their sin in speaking against their heavenly and earthly leaders and asked for help. Accordingly, Moses was instructed to set up on a pole a fiery serpent made of bronze and when one of the people was bitten he was to look at it and he would live. Christ’s saving action is similar but much greater in power as his lifting up will save the world if a person believes in him.

That this is the greatest gift of love is clear. Christ is God’s only son and there are several incidents in his life where he encounters the death of an only child, in one striking case of a widow, moving him to acts of great compassion and raising from the dead. He is the servant of mankind who divests himself of his equality with the Father and assumes the form of a servant. “Glory to thy condescension, O Lord,” your coming down to us; these are familiar words from the Vespers service of Holy Friday. God offers himself for us on the Cross. “What more could God do for us” was a question posed by Metropolitan Kallistos in one of his sermons on that same day many years ago in this church.

But the text also includes an invitation: “...that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” “I have come not to condemn the world but to save it.” There is no force here, no compulsion, no pressure. Only an invitation. This kind of belief is caught not taught. There is no forced or pressurised conversion as we see in history by the tsar and some of the European colonialists, which can only result in faith which has no sincerity, no depth in the heart. But love does challenge us to respond even at the simple human level. I remember a couple who were together at the University here and one day the lady burst into her boyfriend’s room unannounced and exclaimed for all those present to hear, “Charles, I’m in love with you. What are you going to do about it?” After Charles had fallen off his chair and picked himself up from the floor to the stunned silence of his friends who were watching this drama intensely, he realised that he needed to propose, which he did sometime later. They were soon married. So how do we respond to love. It seems by volunteering, by accepting the invitation or like the wicked tenants of the vineyard some weeks ago by rejecting the offer. What makes us accept Christ’s invitation? There are a number of possible answers: a vision of beauty, a revelation, something which catches our hearts: an icon of great beauty, a meeting with a person who has acquired something of what we might call holiness, a witness to an act of love or compassion which overwhelms us and leaves us a different person from before. I could go further but an expression of love by one side poses a duty of immediate response, a challenge, by the other.

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This revelation in its many forms comes from God. Christ forces the issue and asks Peter, “Who do men say that I am?” When Peter gives different answers, Jesus asks him “And who do you say that I am?” When Peter answers “You are the Christ”, he replies, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father who is in heaven”. In the same way it is a sudden glimpse of unimaginable love after many painful years and two failed marriages that inspires Mother Maria Skobtsova to offer her life in the place of another in the Nazi concentration camp of Ravensbruck. It is interesting that as the priest vests in the sanctuary before the service begins putting on his cuff on his left hand he prays, “Give me understanding that I may learn thy commandments”. This is a prayer for wisdom, for revelation, for an insight into the mysteries of our faith in God. And I want to say something about forcing or trying to impose our faith on our children and those near us. There is little value in becoming ‘a religious bore or zealot’ except as Bishop Anthony used to say that while he was praying constantly and intensely and not helping round the home he was actually turning his mother and grandmother into martyrs for the faith and people of great patience. Let our actions speak for themselves even when they fall short of what we would like them to be. God uses us in our weakness. And better than wrestle with our little ones at the communion chalice, show by our own taking communion that it is normal and a reflection of our deep relationship with Christ. Our children will soon follow in the same way.

To respond to Christ’s invitation to love requires courage. Our service to him will quickly be revealed to us if love based on understanding is present within us and our weakness will be met with strength from God to fulfil that service. Duty and routine are part of that service and also show our devotion to Christ. Warming our hearts towards God, as St Seraphim calls it, requires prayer, fasting, self-denial and regular reading of the scriptures.

But let me come back to where I started. We celebrate today the incomprehensible love of God for us in giving us his only Son. We shall see it reach its fulfilment in the lifting up or Exaltation of the Cross in a few days’ time. Let us respond to that gift of eternal life which we are promised by our belief in him with our own offer of love and service through the guidance of the Holy Spirit which lives within us.

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