

Greater Love (John 15:9-17)

May I speak in the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

I dare say we all know the name of God, the real, English, you might even say Yorkshire name of God. It is Harold, as in Our Father, which art in heaven, Harold be thy name.

It is a simple childish slip for sure, without too much harm done. It is the kind of mistake that is discovered in Sunday school with some embarrassment and sorted out there and then.

But I do sometimes wonder how many of us have other misunderstandings about the bible, which might run deeper and have greater consequences for our faith development.

Today's Gospel reading, which comes from the 15th Chapter of John's Gospel, has within it some tremendously powerful words; ones that I suspect that sometimes we might misunderstand.

Just to remind you what we heard, we were listening to part of what are called the Farewell discourses in John's Gospel (farewell speeches of Jesus) and the text we had today came straight after Jesus talking about the True Vine, I am the Vine, you are the branches. This is profound stuff and today we get to hear Jesus say these words (I am going to take this translation from the King James for reasons that will become clear later): 'Jesus said, "Greater love hath no man than this, than a man lay down his life for his friends"'. He then goes on, 'You are my friends if you do what I command you'.

My question today is, "What do you make of this?" I suspect we all hear these words with different resonances our minds might go in different directions. Where did yours go? We might have been thinking about the nature of friendship/mateship and what friending now means in our world. We might have thought how sexist those words sound in that translation. We have thought about the cost of war and Wilfred Owen's World War One poem, "Greater Love": 'Red lips are not so red, as the stained stones kissed by the English dead.' We might remember how these words have both formed our culture and then almost been forgotten, almost carelessly discarded. In 1962 Jeremy Thorpe when addressing Harold McMillian after the so called night of the long knives wittily said 'Greater love hath no man than this, than he lay down his friends for his life.' Even back in the 60s the real power of these words was waning.

So what do you make these words?

For me, and I appreciate that this is my take and not necessarily yours, this has always been a difficult text, one I struggled with.

When I was younger and would occasionally go on Christian camps, I might be asked, 'John what is your favourite piece of scripture?' Boy was that a tricky question for a young man

who did not really know the Bible! ‘A psalm’ I might struggle to say, only to have someone then say ‘Oh but which psalm?’

I think a more interesting question to have asked might have been, which text or part of the Bible do you have the most difficulty with? That question, I could probably have answered, even though I would not have known where in the Bible it came from.

You see I, like I suspect many of you, grew up seeing the text ‘Greater love hath no man than this, than a man lay down his life for his friends’ engraved in stone in countless church sanctuaries and (England being England) on the walls of public buildings. And I need to add here that I don’t think I ever saw that saying ascribed to Jesus. I never saw ‘Jesus said “Greater love...”’. It was clearly assumed you would know, even as a child. My how times have changed!

So what would a young mind make of this? Yes, there is no greater love than this, and yes a life of sacrifice might mean a life sacrificed for others. But the connection I did not make was who was offering this sacrifice. At some level it seemed an imposed sacrifice. Growing up in England post Second World War and living through the Falklands War, it seemed to me that it might be expedient for a Government to remind its young men to be ready to die for Queen and Country.

What I dare say I am clumsily saying here is that in my young adult brain this text got confused with ideas of patriotism and civic duty. This is how you are supposed to behave, the engraved graffiti was telling me. This is how we built the Empire, on the sacrifice of the young. A sacrifice unwilling offered is not a sacrifice but a payment or a tax.

Taken from its context this is an amazingly powerful piece of propaganda. Put back in its context it is a truly profound text. A heartbreakingly beautiful cry of love. It is a reminder of what love will do for the beloved.

This level of sacrifice might seem hard to think about, but yet many of us will know it instantly. Should Toby or Alice fall into the road in the face of an oncoming truck, I don’t think I would even have to think, I would put myself in their place. A costly sacrifice for sure, but one that I would hope I would willingly offer.

So Jesus’ words make little sense (and at worst nonsense) unless we know who is offering them and who they are being said to: his friends. Equally these words have no real power for us unless we know that we too are friends of Jesus.

I suspect, and this is where my own liberalism has reached something of an end, that we cannot distil out the ethic of Jesus and make sense of it without Jesus. This was the project of 20th Century liberalism to some extent. Couldn’t we just take those inspiring words and forget the 1st Century Galilean? But it does not work like that. We need to know Jesus to make sense of his words. And that possibility, to truly know our Lord, was open to the disciples back then is still available today.

Faith turns these words, words than are still writing in stone in so many churches and turns them from being a dry imposed taxing duty and makes them a cry of the heart, a reminder of the willingness of God to be with us, to never let us rot alone, and to be our friend.

It might sound cloying, these might sound like words from a bygone age, twee and almost saccharine, but “what a friend we have in Jesus”

Amen

I know my own and my own know men.

Dean John

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