

## Easter 5 – 02-05-21 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:26-32; **John 4:7-21**; **John 15:1-8**

According to statistics released in February this year there are 2.8 billion people in the world with a Facebook account who look at it at least once a month! Astonishingly, this means that almost 36% of the world's population has an active Facebook account. But, the same research tells us that 1.84 billion people check their Facebook account at least once a day! While all this online activity happens Facebook algorithms track the posts, views, and likes of all users and through this develop a profile so that targeted recommendations can be made.

For those of you who are on Facebook I wonder what unsolicited adverts and suggestions have come into your feed recently, and whether you recognise a correlation between what you've searched for on Google and what comes unbidden through Facebook? I must view quite a few music videos because I consistently get in my feed video clips of musical auditions and performances! These have often introduced me to songs and artists I have not heard of, and some of those songs have resonated so significantly that I've learnt them to share with others. One of those songs is 'You are the Reason' by the English singer-songwriter Calum Scott. It is a powerful ballad about love for another person, with the chorus affirming, *'I'd climb every mountain, and swim every ocean; just to be with you, and fix what I've broken; 'cause I need you to see – that you are the reason.'*

I think those lyrics express something we all have a sense of. For they suggest that love can inspire us to, literally and metaphorically, climb mountains and swim oceans to be with or assist someone we love. That there is a deep human longing to be known by and reconciled with another. And, that loving relationship has the potential to give our lives meaning and purpose that it would not have otherwise. The lyrics suggest one lover singing to another, but I don't think they need to be limited to this because there is potential to hear implication for other relationships. The relationship between parent and child; between grand-parent and grandchild; between siblings; and even between ourselves... and God!

With a bit of reframing I imagine God 'singing' to us through the words of the Old Testament prophets, and through the life of Jesus: *'I'd climb every mountain, and swim every ocean; just to be with you, and fix what I've broken; 'cause I need you to see – that you are the reason...'*

'If music be the food of love, play on...' wrote William Shakespeare in the opening line of his comedy 'Twelfth Night'! A master of dramatic writing in English, Shakespeare explored and expressed his understanding of love in many contexts and these include reciprocal and unrequited love; love shared between people; and love for a country or a cause. But, I am not aware of Shakespeare exploring the love we might have for God, or that God might have for us, and would enjoy hearing from you if you have some ideas about this

In the New Testament reading this weekend, the letter writer uses language to express his understanding about the nature of God. In verses nine and sixteen the writer

affirms, quite simply, that God is love. It's important to remember that John's letter was originally written in Greek, and that this form of Greek had three words which are translated 'love'. The first is the Greek word *eros*, which describes sexual love; the second is *phileo*, which describes the love between family members; and the third is *agape*, which describes a love that is given without the expectation of anything in return.

I think the sexual love of *eros*, expects and anticipates some sense of mutual attraction. The family love of *phileo* expects and anticipates the loyalty and support of those we are related to. While *agape* – a term for love not widely used in the first century – was the word that New Testament writers chose to describe the nature of God. In this then God is affirmed to be generous and unconditional, and God loves us: whether we like it, or not! Whether we accept it or reject it, God loves us... because, *agape* love is the nature of God.

Calling the reader and the listener, 'beloved' the writer suggests, '*... let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*'

In this the writer has affirmed his belief that God is love, and that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is an expression of this love; that the ongoing work of God's Spirit in the lives of all who follow Christ is an expression of this; and that we are also to be people who offer *agape* love to all that we share life with.

If Facebook were able to track all our thoughts and actions, and thank God they can't do this yet, I wonder what kinds of love the algorithms would recognise in your life and mine?

Would there be generous and unconditional love for the people we share life with? Not just for those we get along with easily, but for all – even those we don't get along with. Jesus seemed to do this most of the time and, however imperfectly, I think we're called to do the same.

So, in prayer now, let's give thanks for the *agape* love we find in Christ each day; for the practice of *agape* love in our living; and the potential that *agape* love has for the world:

Holy God, we give thanks that you meet us in sacred word, and through this remind us of your love and call. We give thanks for the creativity of songwriters and singers, storytellers and poets and ask your blessing on them. Help us to use our own words wisely, and through your Spirit enable us to live with compassion, generosity, and joy. We pray in the name of Jesus the risen Christ. Amen.