

Reflections on Love

Reflective Worship 6th Feb 2022

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Sometimes you know you have to write something – and then several items on that very topic pop up just as you're preparing to write it. These are the times when as a preacher you kind of feel that maybe God is drawing your attention to the direction your words should take!

So this week's words are based on a reflection by Professor John Swinton, Chair in Divinity and Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen, which was published this week by Adult Learning at St Paul's Cathedral. His words will be interspersed with other things to think about and meditate upon, and each little section will conclude with some music to create space for the Holy Spirit to work within us.

So please make yourself as comfortable as you can, as we begin.....

[JS] Thomas Merton once wrote: "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy." I like that a lot.

Our job as human beings is not to attempt to determine who is and who is not worthy of love. We are simply asked to love without questions. When we do that, we discover that the very act of loving enables us to see other people as worthy.

He was lying as close to 'in the gutter' as makes no difference. In a dirty backstreet in the sleazy part of town. 3am. A pool of vomit, clothing badly soiled. Face deeply lined. Scarred. Unlovely. It was hard to tell if he was conscious – his eyelids flickered but he gave no sign that he was aware of what was going on around him.

The few passers-by who had seen him staggering along the pavement had assumed that he was drunk. Just another one of many. Nothing to see here – move along there. And they did. Even as his legs gave way and he fell to the ground. Walk on by.

Time passed. Minutes? Hours? People came and went. Maybe some gave thanks to someone – who? Their god? What sort of god would that be? - anyway, they gave thanks that it wasn't them. At least, not today.

And still they passed. Some turned their faces the other way as if not actually looking at the bundle of humanity on the ground meant that it was somehow “not there”. Some chose to walk on the other side of the alleyway, others barely noticed him. One even tripped and fell – landed perilously close - but levered themselves upright again and carried on their way.

The young man had been with his friends. He'd said he had a call to make – he needed to check in with his Dad – and he'd make his own way back to where they were staying. He was the one who stopped. Who knelt at the side of the fallen man, checked his breathing, saw the tell-tale signs of the drooping face, made him comfortable, and sat and took his hand whilst they waited for the ambulance. The old man's eyelids fluttered open. His eyes met those of the young man . Connected. And as if through a window deep into the old man's soul the young man saw.... Saw the years of hurts received and given; of deeds generous and terrible; of love offered, rejected, denied – and deeper still, to all the love and potential that had been stolen. Gently held his gaze. Knew him for who he had always been intended to be. Restored his dignity. Lying there in the street in a pool of vomit.

Maybe this is what love looks like. And what it can do.

Reflect and listen to “Ubi caritas”

Taize Vol 1 Track 13. 3:05 mins, fade out after about 2:30)

[JS] Loving others can be hard work and love is not always romantic. We know this from our own loves – raising a child, a long friendship, a marriage, caring for someone who is ill or being cared for. Love takes time, commitment, and a genuine desire to say to other people in all circumstances: “I’m glad that you are here; it’s good that you exist.” Try saying these words to someone today. You’ll like what you discover.

“I’m glad that you are here; it’s good that you exist.”

*Who would you find it easy to say that to? Plan to do it
(Short time to think/reflect/pray)*

*Who would you find it hard to say that to? What might happen if you
could say it?
(Short time to think/reflect/pray)*

*Who would you otherwise never even think of saying that to? Pray that
God may open your eyes.
(Short time to think/reflect/pray)*

Reflect and listen to “The Lord is my light”

Taize Vol 1 (2:47 mins)

[JS] “The whole Christian journey is about love. We are loved into existence; loved throughout our lives and we are loved eternally by our heavenly Father who *is* love. The job of loving relates to how we are with God, with our neighbours, but also with ourselves. Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God, love our neighbour and ourselves.

Those of us who spend our lives loving and caring for others can easily

overlook the importance of loving and caring for ourselves. But *you* matter, *I* matter, *we* all matter.”

For our third mini-reflection I'm going cheat and again use someone else's words. This 'someone else' is Catherine Fox, senior lecturer and academic director of the Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University, and author of wickedly insightful novels set in the Church of England. Which invariably contain more than one effortless leap from a skewering of the absurdity of daily life to reflecting on the reality of the grace and glory of God in the everyday. Incidentally, she knows her Anglican victims well - her husband is the Bishop of Sheffield.

Last week she wrote in the Church Times about her attempts to be kinder to herself....

“There’s a curious embargo on self-kindness (in Christian circles)....

“I learned a few years back not to call myself a stupid idiot whenever I made a mistake, but, rather, to talk to myself as I would talk to a good friend. I assumed that this meant that I’d mastered the art of self-compassion...(but as I went deeper)....it emerged that there were subtler things to refrain from doing to myself on the grounds that I would never treat a good friend in this way.

“I wouldn’t for example, ring up a beloved fellow writer and say: “Not sure you will have spotted this, but you’ve got another 1* review on Good Reads. Let me read it to you.” And I wouldn’t then make follow-up calls at five-minute intervals for the next two days, quoting choice sections, and suggesting detailed ripostes.

“Nor would I pursue her round the house alerting her to every reflective surface that offered an unflattering image, pointing out that she’d let herself go, comparing her with other people, and urging diet and exercise regimes.

“Which is *very* interesting. This might have implications for the idea of loving your neighbour as yourself. If we treat ourselves meanly, mightn’t we end up with judgmentalism, defensiveness, and competition as our default responses to those around us?

“Which maybe kicks off the response, “Oh no, I’m a bad person! I should be better at being kind to myself so that I can be kinder to others.”

“If some such thought flitted across your mind, then this would be a good moment to say, “Oh dear.”

“Because actually – again, we wouldn’t say this to a dear friend. Or a small child. We all know how to do this for a little person. We say something like, “Oh dear! My poor darling. You fell over. You dropped your precious thing and it’s broken. But it’s OK. Let’s see if we can mend it.”

“Love, love, love. The trick is to hunt out the little person inside ourselves and say this to them.”

Abridged from Diary, Catherine Fox
Church Times Jan 28th 2022

Reflect and listen to “My peace I give you”

(Taize Vol 2 track 12. 5:04 mins – fade out after 2-2:30)

So to conclude with the final paragraph of Prof Swinton’s reflection

[JS] Our job is to bring that beautiful message of love, in all of its dimensions, into a world that desperately needs it. God may be invisible, but people can see God’s love when they see love-at-work in us. Our job is to love others. Sounds like a nice line of work to me?

Lead into hymn or song, or straight into intercessions.

Professor John Swinton is Chair in Divinity and Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen, and founder of the University's Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability.