

Hanham Methodist Church

Chapel Road, Hanham, Bristol, BS15 8SD

10.45am Sunday 2 February 2025

Lectionary:

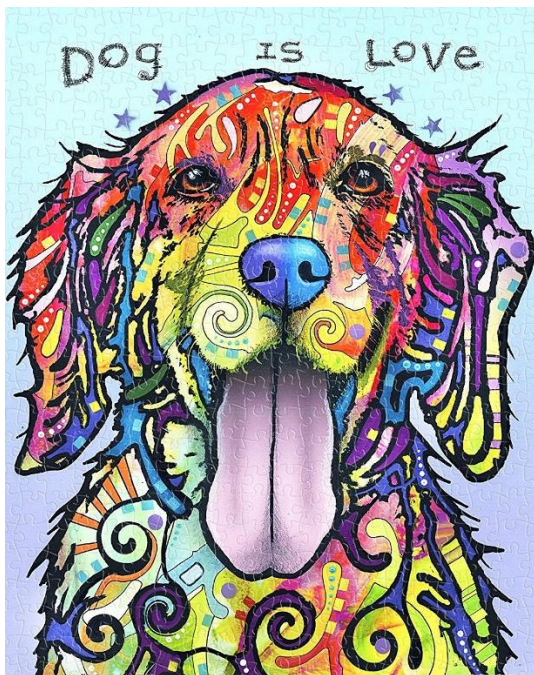
Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

Sermon



A few years ago a friend gave me a t-shirt with this image on it.

Dog is Love...

We can learn so much from the way that dogs love. My dogs amaze me by their devotion, their desire for relationship, but their capacity to want to protect me, even if it means putting themselves at risk.

Thursday night, Coco my older dog goes to agility training. A few months ago she met Stanley a 3 month old Golden Retriever puppy and the two of them have bonded incredibly. This last Thursday they caught sight of each other from opposite ends of the car park and dragged both owners together as they joyfully met and bounced all over each other – Coco was transformed into an 11.5 year old puppy!



In church teaching we have long used the phrase 'God is Love' in the hope of attracting people to God. If by this we mean a God who will run across a car park to greet us in an exuberance of joy and will jump all around in excitement to see us – then maybe we're heading towards the right image.

But too often it has been more like this...

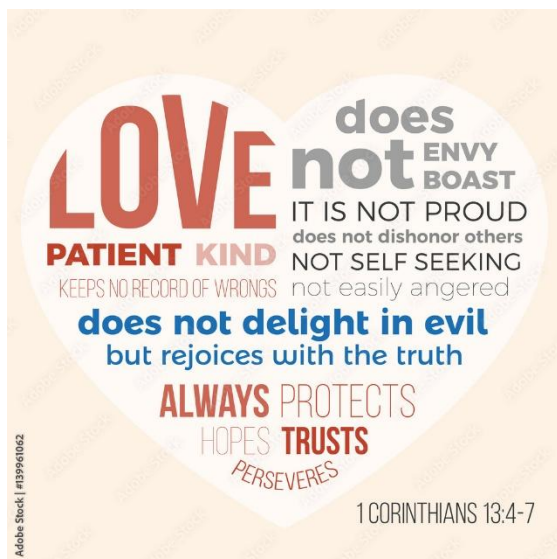


The workhouse in Oliver!, emblazoned with the declaration that 'God is Love' while treating the poor children in its care with anything but love.

In the musical, Oliver! the lead character sings "Where is love?"

I want to consider what is love?

In our Corinthians reading Paul attempts to offer a definition.

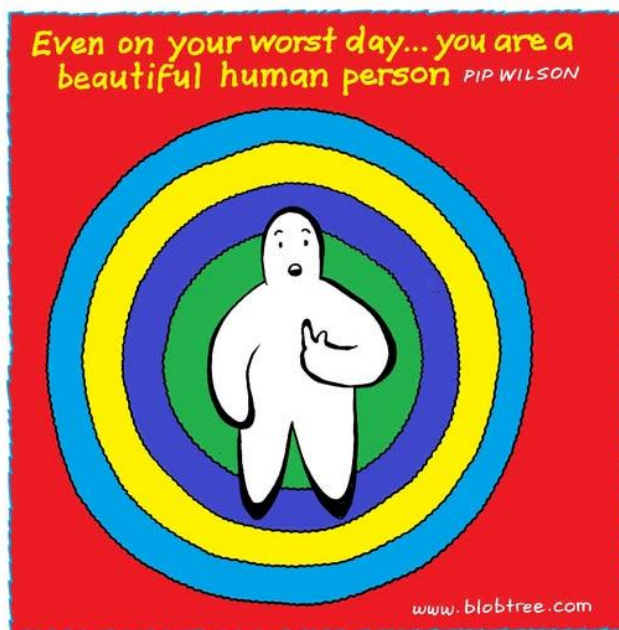


⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Each one of those characteristics could fill a series of sermons...

For now we will accept that this is a fantastic aspiration that we can only hope to achieve with God's help.

In addition, God calls us to love one another, but we cannot love unless we accept that we are ourselves loved...



The youth worker Pip Wilson (sadly no relative) wrote this to encourage us to accept ourselves a lovable...

UNIQUE

You are a Beautiful Human Person as you read this.

Read this and absorb it-don't read these words flippantly.

Unique

Are you reading?

They are written for YOU especially YOU.

You are a valuable person

You are a special person

You are a unique person

You are beautiful You are precious

You are unrepeatable

You are mysterious

You are a beautiful human person

No one will ever exist like you

No one will ever experience a life that you have experienced

You are a collection of specialness that has never been put together before

Your life deserves a film premier at a West End cinema

You are so special and uable that Jesus has died for you He loves you so much that he has given his life for you His love is completely and totally 100% for you His love for You is unconditional

If you became a better person now, if you became a committed Christian today-either or both, God couldn't love you any more tomorrow.

His love for you is total NOW and he cannot love you any more. Of course he deserves a response and it makes him happy if we respond BUT his love is not dependent on it. You are 100%, totally and completely loved.

Pip Wilson

Easter 2005

Of course the reality is that each of us is utterly UNIQUE – just like every other person who has ever lived and will live.

So having accepted what love is, having accepted that we might be lovable...

What next???



In last week's lectionary Jesus visited the synagogue in Nazareth and spelled out his mission;

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.’

This week Jesus declares that this very scripture is fulfilled for them in their hearing...

The people challenge him to do in his own home town what they have heard of him doing elsewhere, but Jesus points out that is not necessarily God's way. Elijah did not tend to his local widows during a famine – he was sent elsewhere. Elisha did not heal the lepers in Israel, rather he healed a foreigner – Naaman, a Syrian.

The people were furious and attempted to kill him, but he walked away through them...

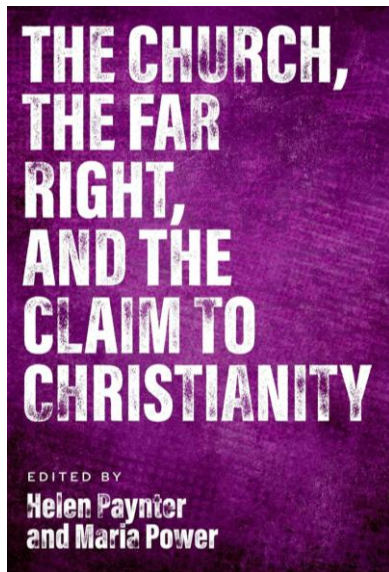
There is a growing pressure in this country as in others, to focus on 'our own' – to turn away the foreigner seeking help from us, to focus spending at home rather than overseas aid. This narrative suggests that we should only care for ourselves and those 'like' us. That we pull up the drawbridges and forget those in need – at least until we are sure that all of 'us' are OK.

This is the divisive and self serving message of the Far Right – we see this in the USA with the attitude of Trump. Make America Great Again – get rid of the 'illegal' immigrants, blame Equality and Inclusion for the plane crash that killed people this last week.

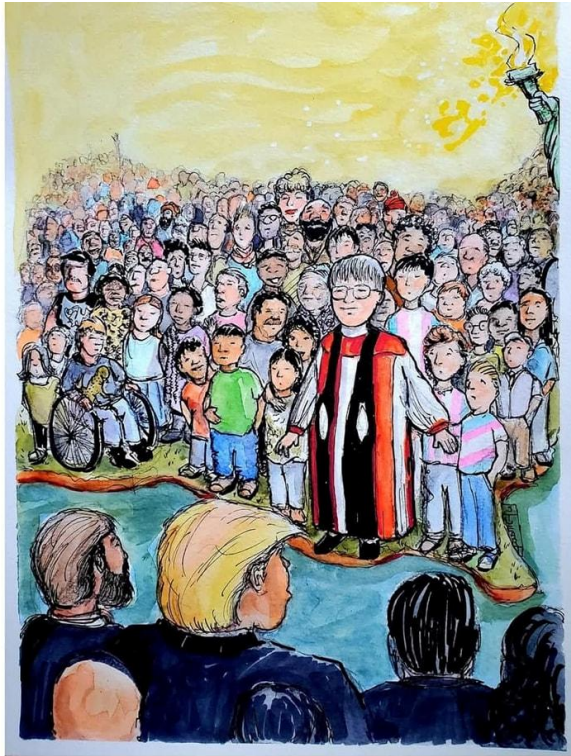
It is an attempt to build 'Unity' based on 'Us against the rest of the world' and we are not innocent in this country – we see very similar rhetoric from Farage and others in Reform

and other more extreme far right groups. It's not unique to the English speaking countries either – witness the situation in Germany this last week where, to the horror of many, in an attempt to force through legislation to curb immigration the Christian Democratic Union party formed an alliance with the far right Alternative for Germany party – breaking a 75 year consensus among all German Democrats that they do not make common cause with the far right.

If you are interested, this is explored in much more detail in the book “The Church, The Far Right, and the Claim to Christianity” edited by a former colleague of mine from Bristol Baptist College – Revd Dr Helen Paynter.



But this attempt at a false ‘Unity’ was the source of Rev Marianne Budde (Bishop of Washington DC) sermon at the inauguration of Donald Trump a few days back... her words have caused uproar, but it is worth hearing some excerpts;



"The Gulf of Empathy," (11 x 15) watercolor,

Rev. Marianne Budde Bishop of Washington DC...

The first foundation for unity is honouring the inherent dignity of every human being, which is, as all the faiths represented here affirm, the birthright of all people as children of our one God. In public discourse, honouring each other's dignity means refusing to mock or discount or demonize those with whom we differ, choosing instead to respectfully debate our differences and whenever possible to seek common ground. And if common ground is not possible, dignity demands that we remain true to our convictions without contempt for those who hold convictions of their own.

Second, foundation for unity is honesty, in both private conversation and public discourse. If we are not willing to be honest, there is no use in praying for unity because our actions work against the prayers themselves. We might, for a time, experience a false sense of unity among some but not the sturdier broader unity that we need to address the challenges that we face. Now to be fair we don't always know where the truth lies, and there is a lot working against the truth now. But when we do know, when we know what is true, it is incumbent upon us to speak the truth, even when, especially when, it costs us.

On the third and last foundation, I'll mention today is, foundation for unity, is humility, which we all need, because we are all fallible human beings. We make mistakes. We say and do things that we later regret. We have our blind spots and our biases. And perhaps we are most dangerous to ourselves and others when we are persuaded without a doubt that we are absolutely right and someone else is absolutely wrong, because then we are just a few steps from labelling ourselves as the good people versus the bad people. And the truth is that we are all people. We are both capable of good and bad. Alexander Solzhenitsyn once

astutely observed that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties, but through, right through every human heart, through all human hearts. And the more we realize this, the more room we have within ourselves for humility and openness to one another across our differences, because in fact we are more like one another than we realize, and we need each other.

...

Let me make one final plea, Mr. President....

In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian, and transgender children in Democratic, Republican and Independent families, some who fear for their lives. And the people, the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings, who labour in poultry farms and meat packing plants, who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shifts in hospitals. They, they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes and are good neighbours. They are faithful members of our churches and mosques, synagogues, gurdwara and temples.

I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands, to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger for we were all once strangers in this land.

As Christians, like Jeremiah God has known us and called us since before we were born - we are loved, we are called to love, and we are called to live out that love in action – and like Jeremiah, God will accept no excuses.

May God grant us the courage to love the way God loves, to seek to discern God's will and to respond even as unwanted prophets in our land to speak God's word to all.

AMEN