

**God is Love
Perfect love is inconsistent with fear**

Sunday 10 May 2009

**Church of the Ascension, Hilton
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Focus: NT Reading - 1 John 4: 7 – 21
(Reading extended from the Lectionary)

ARE YOU AFRAID OF GOD? [Loud, booming voice]

Because if you are NOT, you OUGHT TO BE! You should tremble in your pews, so sit up and listen to what I have to say! [Pound the pulpit]

Ok, Ok – not even as a gimmick can I continue in that vein, I don't want you cringing or heading for the door, and you know that "hellfire and brimstone" is not my style – not even my type of "preacher's voice".

I want to focus principally on today's NT reading, in the First Letter of John, in which God is amply described as a Being characterised by Love with a capital L. So often, people's responses to God are based on fear, even though John can write, "perfect love casts out fear". This is John the hardy fisherman who became one of the Apostles, who seems to have been especially close to Jesus, and who also wrote one of the accounts of Jesus' life – The Gospel of John. I'd like to examine some of what he wrote in a little more detail.

John goes into detail on God's love for us: It is not so much that we loved God, for Love comes from God in the first place, he says; he makes a strong point that God took the initiative in love, and revealed love to us in sending Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Then he goes on to elaborate on ways in which we ought to respond to this love – a point to which we'll return shortly – and says our relationship with God ought not to be characterised by fear, because "perfect love casts out fear".

Is it as simple as that? Don't we all fear God? Shouldn't we fear God? Doesn't the Bible also teach us to come before God in fear and trembling?

Perhaps there is good reason for elements of fear of God, and I'd like to suggest the following:

There is ample wording throughout Scripture that describes God as a being capable of anger. God is angered at people's behaviour which does not accord with how he created us to be, or which goes against his best designs.

God is angered at the stubbornness of people in ignoring God, especially when God has taken trouble to be revealed in personal ways and to make known God's expectations, and then they are rejected or after a while are ignored. And, in human love at least, we know how hurtful it is to be ignored, dismissed, or reacted to with indifference – so surely God must experience something like that too?

Then there are some words in the Scriptures that speak of an awful fate for those who deliberately and knowingly do evil and reject God, and the concept of a final judgment is not a man-made one, but one spoken of in several sections of the Scriptures including the Psalms, the writings of the prophets, amongst the NT letters, and by Jesus himself.

So, we may conclude, we have reason to fear.

But perhaps we ought to fear our OWN reactions to God, more than to fear God as a being.

Consider this: When Jesus spoke, these are some of the characteristics of his speech:

- Jesus said he had come to bring Light into the world, and not to condemn, but to redeem
- Jesus spoke harsh words to those who were stubbornly evil in their choices, but he spoke words of compassion to the people considered in the religious society of that day as “the greatest of sinners” – such as defrauding tax collectors and prostitutes
- Jesus criticism was especially harsh towards self-righteous people, rather than towards those who were humbly aware of their sinfulness. The strongest words were reserved for the religious perfectionists who regarded themselves as above ordinary people because of keeping Jewish customary and dietary laws, but offered no mercy and were often hypocritical in their application of religious law. “You are like whitewashed tombs,” he said, implying they were sparkling and shiny on the outside but empty and rotting inside. Quite an indictment – one that I would be afraid of receiving.
- Yet Jesus frequently spoke words of pity and was a man of compassion, and when others were ready to condemn the woman caught in adultery and to stone her, he literally and figuratively set her

free firstly by challenging those without sin to be the first to cast a stone, and then by speaking compassionately and redemptively to her.

So when John writes about God as Love, he does so not only because that is the teaching of prophets or rabbis, but because it has been seen and experienced in the Person of Jesus. This is how God's Love has been revealed, he writes.

Earlier, he writes that the one who says he is without sin is lying – but if we are honest and confess our sins, God will forgive us. He is not “soft on sin”, ignoring the reality of it. Rather, knowing its reality, and the effects it has of damaging us in person and damaging the relationship we have with God, he encourages us to deal with it truthfully. But his focus is on God as a being of Love.

I hope that is useful for us – no matter if we have heard it many times before. Thank God for grace! In my experience, there is often a fear of God – it may not be expressed crassly like that, but in more nuanced ways. Perhaps only a few of us have heard true “hellfire and brimstone” preachers, many of us may have heard about them or heard reference to them – it's a bit of a stereotype, tho' I've certainly heard my fair share of them. More than one parishioner has recounted stories to me, for instance, of funerals they have attended where they have indeed wanted to cringe as a preacher raged from the pulpit about the anger of God BURNING against them...

John the Baptist was perhaps a person in that mould, as were some of the prophets in the centuries before Jesus – but as I've said before, principally their anger was directed at those who deliberately chose evil, and those who were so self-righteous about their religion that they regarded themselves alone as worthy of God's dotting attention.

But relationship with God characterised by fear is neither a helpful image of God, nor one that accurately suits God as displayed in the person of Jesus Christ. Love as our primary motivation, as response to God's love, is far more appropriate than sheer fear or terror. A forgotten word these days, is “awe” ... which suggests being overwhelmed by the goodness or great qualities of another – and sometimes when the Scriptures translate a word as “fear”, the word “awe” might be more appropriate.

But I can't just end there – if we are in Awe of our Loving God, and have responded to God's initiative of love, John goes on to write that we cannot be in tune with God if we do not show love in how we live:

“We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God

whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

Strong words! We often have a good laugh at those descriptions of prayers of children, like the little girl who told God off, saying “Dear God – you say I have to love my brother, but if you had known what my brother was going to be like before you made him be born, you would never had said that!”

Yet let us not trivialise John’s words, or take them only literally in terms of familial brothers and sisters. Again, thank God for Grace, for surely we all fall down here. But an essential part of Christian discipleship is understanding and experiencing God’s love, so that we may be transformed and increasingly reflect the love of God in all our relationships with people.

I end with two brief comments to reflect on, and for any who may want to take further what has been said this morning, whether in reading or prayer or discussion:

Amongst all the daily aspects of living in ways that reflect love for others, in our personal lives and in community, two ways to consider are these:

Firstly:

In his book “Jesus Today”, theologian Albert Nolan [who lives here in Pietermaritzburg] writes about how so much of our “love” is in fact seeking mostly after our own needs. He writes of the radical freedom that comes from learning to love in ways that are detached from constantly chasing after our own needs.

Love that considers the needs of others and not just our own needs, is described in one of the several Greek words for love, Agape, a word used in the New Testament to describe God’s love for us: An unselfish love that is even sacrificial if needs be, that looks primarily to the needs of the other. It is not to be confused with “being a doormat” or accepting of abuse, which is one awful way in which that could be twisted or misunderstood, but instead is a reflection of the way Jesus loved us. Time does not permit me to say more on that but it is worth reading and exploring further.

Secondly and finally:

... Is to be less condemnatory of other people. Human beings often excel at condemnation and criticism, and as a consequence, people are often afraid to “be real” or make themselves vulnerable because of stigma / fear of rejection / fear of not being considered good enough.

[George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), novelist, 1819-1880]

We hand folks over to God's mercy, and show none ourselves.

Post Communion Reading:

Following Communion I want to read the famous words of Paul on Love, written in his letter to the Corinthians chapter 13 – using the contemporary words of Eugene Peterson’s translation called “The Message”, because it presents that familiar passage in a way that is at once practical and very striking!

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**Opening prayer of worship**

God of unexplained mysteries and unexpected events,  
We rejoice in the Good News of Easter.  
Good triumphs.  
There is healing salvation for all peoples of the earth.  
We greet the dawn of a new day.

As You sent Jesus to fulfil Your promise,  
Now fill us with Your Spirit.  
We welcome the presence of Christ,  
And ask that through our worship,  
We may be changed and made whole.  
In the name of our Risen Lord we pray. Amen.

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