

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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ABIDING IN LOVE

15th October 2017

Psalm 23

1 John 4:16-5:5

If you go to a classical concert and listen to one of the great symphonies, depending on the composer and his or her intentions, you may find that as the piece swells and grows, though swift or slower movements, you notice that even when there is a change of tempo or of melody, that there is still a cohesiveness, something of what has gone before is echoed in what comes later, until as you come towards the conclusion, you find that all that has been important in the piece is brought together in a glorious climax. You could try to sit and unpick the various elements of the music, to determine where they have come from, but that is not what it is for. It is better to sit and let the sounds wash over you, to experience it, rather than explain it, and let the experience speak to you.

As we come towards the conclusion of John's great letter – and it is a great letter, one of the most profound works to be found in our Bible – we will find that some themes we have met before will sound again in our ears, while others will be developed in new ways. Yes, there is much we need to understand, but we also should just listen, just listen and wonder and let the words seep into our bones, so that they can become part of us, and can inform our lives.

Words such as: God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

We love because he first loved us.

His commandments are not burdensome.

Whatever is born of God conquers the world.

Let these phrases dance and sing and float in your mind and you may begin to glimpse something of the wonder that John is trying to convey. For what he is showing us is beyond words, and beyond visual art: it may be that in the end only music could express it.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God. Isn't "abide" a lovely word? It has a great sense of permanency about it. It means to live or dwell or have your belonging place, but it also means to be steadfast and immovable, just as you might say that the mountains will abide when our short lives among them are over. We are called, given the amazing offer, to abide in God. God offers himself as our real and permanent home. It was St. Augustine of Hippo who said: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it find its rest in Thee." If we find that rest, the rest Jesus offered us when he said, "Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) then we will carry it with us no matter what the outward circumstances of our lives – whether they seem to stagnate or whether they are never the same from one day to another; whether they are lived in tranquillity or in turmoil.

We abide in God, we are rooted and grounded in God when we abide in love, when we are rooted and grounded in love, in giving our love to others, in not thinking of ourselves. That love may lead us to live in dangerous places, doing difficult things, or it may lead us to make hidden sacrifices that only God knows of, so that someone else may be helped. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. Since the beginning of human society, people have feared when they thought of God. They have feared the power of God, they have feared that God might be unpredictable and seemingly random, they have feared the wrath of God. You find this in all societies, with all kinds of religious belief. There is a fear of God or of the gods, and a need to appease them. The Jewish world from which our Christian faith sprang is also this realm of fear. Yes, the Hebrew people believed in only one God, but this was a God who had to be obeyed implicitly, or face consequences. There were those of God's spokesmen, his priest and his prophets who tried to tell that He was also a God of love, which is why we read the 23rd Psalm this morning, a song which talks of God's care and providing and protection, not of his demands. But this was not what most people understood. They understood that there was ritual to be done and laws to be kept and they had better do it and keep them.

And this fear of God has flowed through the Christian Church as well. This idea that you had better be good or else. But John says there is no need for that. There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear. God's love is perfect, because God is love itself and Jesus is love incarnate. God's love is perfect, and if we understand that, then his love will remove the fear from our dealings with him. Yes, he is still the all-powerful who deserves our obedience, and our wonder and our honour. But if we understand that he is love, that his love is for us, that his love is concrete, rooted in life, not just an abstraction – if we understand that, then we will give him the obedience, the wonder the honour, not because we must but because we want to, because it flows naturally from us, as the amazing truth of his love for us sinks deeper and deeper into our understanding.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

We love because he first loved us. All these wonderful themes hold together, don't they? They make a rich music, which is the music of truth. If God's perfect love casts out our fear of him, then it makes room for his love, to grow in our lives. He loved us first – this is something we say each time a child is baptised in this church. I hold the infant and I say,

X for you Jesus Christ came into the world.
for you he lived and showed God's love:
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last "it is accomplished";
for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;
for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand.
All this he did for you, X, although you do not know it yet.
And so the Scripture is fulfilled: "We love because God loved us first."

He loved us before we were born and certainly before we could begin to understand it. He will love us just the same, as our understanding grows. Loving because he loved is the only way to live as a Christian. We cannot live in God's love if we do not know his love for us. We cannot show his love to others unless our hearts are full and overflowing with wonder that God should love us, should send Jesus, his Word made flesh.

We love because he first loved us.

His commandments are not burdensome. This theme ties in with perfect love casting out fear. There are commandments, but if they are undertaken for love of God, in response to God's love for us, then they are not burdensome. They are comprehensive, though. The two great commands which Jesus endorsed were to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself. The great command which Jesus gave was that we should love one another, as he loved us, even to laying down our lives for our friends. These are all-embracing commands. There is no part of your life which you can say falls outside them. They affect everything. And why shouldn't they? If we believe in a God who loves completely, who gave himself completely, why would we think that our response could be anything other than complete as well. Complete, but not burdensome.

What we do for someone in love is not a problem. What you do for your husband or wife, for your children or grandchildren, you do because you love them, and even if you are doing something that might not be your first choice of activity, you do it gladly, because it is what they want or need, and what they want or need is most important to you. In the same way, if we are responding to God's love with love, then doing for him or for others what is needed, what is wanted, the things that we can do, will not be a burden to us. It may be difficult at times, it may be inconvenient and mean that our own wants have to be put aside, but it not a burden, because love changes our priorities.

His commandments are not burdensome.

Whatever is born of God conquers the world. Whatever, not whoever: John is not talking here about people, but about what people do. The things that God's children do in his love, these things drive away the darkness of the fallen world, they shed the light of the new creation found in the Kingdom of God. They are the car schemes, they are the Laggan's helping hand project. They are Rhyme Time and they are neighbourly visits and offers of help. They are the offers of tea and the listening ear. They are the giving of money and of time and of goods because others need them.

These things are born of God, they are born of God's love made manifest through the actions of his children, and they overcome, they defeat, the fallenness of the world. They are part of the work of redemption and we are all a part of that. Whatever is born of God conquers the world.

And so the music of John's letter sweeps us up into its wonder. We are not quite finished with it yet, but as it moves towards a crescendo, we can sit back, enjoy the experience and allow his words to change us. Amen.

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