

Holy Week Sermons at Holy Trinity Headington Quarry, 2021

Love, Loss and Life, explored through the writings of C.S. Lewis

Maundy Thursday: Love

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Looking back over the past year of the Covid-19 pandemic, this Dickensian sentiment rings true. We have seen human nature at its very best—loving, compassionate, gentle, kind. We have seen the human predicament at its very worst—sickness, suffering, isolation, death. As we begin to recover from this very best and very worst of times, we mark these three great days of Holy Week, which are themselves a meditation on the best and the worst of times. Last year, I was the only person allowed in the church building in Holy Week, and I came here daily to pray. From time to time, I found myself sitting in C.S. Lewis's pew, hoping that inspiration from a great Christian thinker connected with our church could provide some kind of guidance. Some of you may be familiar with that interview question in the Church Times: 'who would you most like to be locked in a church with?' I would probably say C.S. Lewis, were it not for the fact that it feels like I already spent the best part of last year locked in a church with him.

During the Second World War, at one of the darkest points in the crisis, Lewis began a series of radio broadcasts, now published in the book *Mere Christianity*. The talks brought comfort to many at a time when everything seemed bleak—offering space to articulate some of the deep foundational questions of meaning and purpose that often arise in times of crisis, and from the perspective of the Christian faith. As we reflect on this current crisis, I hope to draw on some insights of Lewis that can frame our journey over these next three days. In keeping with the spirit of 'mere' Christianity, the themes are simple: love, loss and life.

That love should be the focus for Maundy Thursday would seem clear from our gospel reading, which has love at its centre: Jesus, having loved his disciples to the end, demonstrates this love through an act of service and humility—washing their feet—and commands them to 'love one another, as I have loved you' (John 13.34). If we could pick any verse in the Bible to encapsulate the essence of Christianity—mere Christianity—it would surely be this one: love one another, as I—God—have loved you. And yet for all its simplicity, the nature of God as love is a concept we find difficult to grasp. So difficult, in fact, that it had to be revealed to us in language we could understand and in words and actions we could remember.

One reason for the difficulty is that the English word 'love' is not nuanced enough to capture all the many ways in which we use it. C.S. Lewis wrote a book called 'the four loves', explaining that in Greek there are four different words for love, but only one of them—*agape*—comes close to describing the love that is at the heart of God's identity: an unconditional, unselfish, unpossessive love, which pours itself out for others. This is the love with which we are loved by God, and with which we are asked to love one another.

Lewis follows a familiar thread in discussions of the nature of love—going back at least as far as the Greek philosopher Plato. The idea is that we move progressively from love of particular physical things and individuals, through to a more abstract and universal notion of love itself. Lewis calls this 'primal love', the Divine energy present from the beginning of time, inherent to all creation. How do we grasp this vast, invisible energy of divine love? We begin with our own concrete experiences of love: friendship, parental or sibling love, romantic love, even

love of certain places or objects. All our lived human experiences of love can be seen through a bigger lens of divine love: as Lewis puts it, 'we must try to relate the human activities called loves to that Love which is God'. Try is the operative word; our finite human minds struggle to comprehend the infinite love of God.

When Jesus got up from the table, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a bowl, and washed the feet of his disciples, he was able to reveal something of this vast, invisible energy of divine love in a language they could understand and in words and actions they could remember. Modern psychologists might call this: love language. The primary human love languages are said to be: words of affirmation, physical touch, acts of service, gifts and quality time. There are countless examples of these love languages in the gospel stories depicting Jesus's life and his interaction with those around him, and especially in this scene. The disciples are affirmed by the words they hear, and spoken to on equal terms to their Lord and teacher. They know they are loved. They are physically touched in this act of loving service. They are given the most precious gift a teacher can give—words of wisdom. They spend quality time with Jesus—some of his last hours on earth—and he spends them doing everything possible to remind them that he loves them and will love them to the very end. He is aware there is so little time left: 'I am with you only a little longer'. These actions leave a trace, a remembrance, a blueprint for human love, seen through a far bigger lens of divine love; when Jesus is no longer with them, they begin to see this bigger picture: "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand" (John 13.7).

One of the great challenges of Covid-19 has been the way it has disrupted our familiar human love languages. Some of us have been deprived of physical touch; some of us have been deprived of quality in-person time with those we love; birthday and anniversary celebrations have taken place without the exchange of gifts; the stress and strain and anxiety may have taken away our ability to find meaningful words of affirmation for others; acts of service have been complicated by social distancing and lockdown. It has been the worst of times. And yet, for all the ways in which the suffering of this pandemic has disrupted our familiar ways of expressing love, we have still experienced love in countless and unexpected ways. We have offered words of affirmation to those we might never have noticed before—like our neighbours, or the delivery drivers bringing our shopping. Gifts of time and care have been offered and received. For some, cutting out the daily commute has created more quality time with our families. People have performed acts of service and physically cared for us or our loved ones when we have been unable to—the carers, nurses, and doctors who, like Jesus, have washed and dried the bodies of those unable to wash themselves. In all this, we have realised that love is never extinguished by suffering; rather, it takes on a different form and a different language—a divine language.

In giving his disciples this command—love one another as I have loved you—Jesus invites them and us to follow him along the path of great love, aware that this journey may involve suffering, pain and loss, but that the primal energy of divine love can transform any human experience—even a pandemic—into what Lewis calls 'the tuneful instrument of love itself'. 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13.35). As we begin to recover from this pandemic, may our awareness of the love given and love received over this past year strengthen us and remind us that: where love and charity are, there God is.

Good Friday: Loss

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes: 'pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world'. That is to say, pain has an insistence about it that cannot be ignored. It stops us in our tracks; it disrupts our plans; it calls out to be attended to in some way. At no point does this mean that God is the one who causes pain; what it means is that God can speak through our pain to reveal something important.

Yesterday we reflected on the theme of love, and the love language expressed in some of Jesus's last moments with his disciples. Today, the focus is on loss—and in particular, the pain of loss attached to suffering and death. Love and suffering, it seems, are connected. Lewis puts it this way: 'Of all the arguments against love', none makes so strong an appeal to my nature as "Careful! This might lead you to suffering.'" To love another person is to open up the possibility of getting hurt. To love the entire creation opens God up to that same possibility. That is the mystery we ponder on Good Friday.

I need to tread carefully and gently over territory that may be raw for many of us. Some of us may be recently bereaved; all of us are aware that in this country alone there are around 150,000 sets of families and friends facing bereavement because someone they love has died from Covid-19. This is no moment for empty platitudes or lengthy preaching. It is a moment to stand still and to ponder the mystery of the Cross—God's great act of solidarity with a suffering and wounded and grieving world.

Jesus, the crucified one, carries this mystery of universal suffering—the consequence of universal love—within himself, and he carries it in order to change it and change us. 'Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases' (Isa 53.4). The pain of the cross acts as a kind of megaphone: revealing something about our worst human tendencies: to blame, to scapegoat, to lie, to hurt and betray others, to remain silent in the face of injustice. How far we can fall from the path of great love that we are asked to follow. On the Cross, Jesus the divine and human one, somehow holds and carries the very worst that is in us, and invites us to confront it and change—not blaming or walking away, but facing up to the truth of things: 'For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth'. The truth that nothing in creation is beyond the scope of divine love and transformation.

The pain and loss of this pandemic has also, in a way, acted as a megaphone: crying out for our attention, stopping us in our tracks, disrupting our plans, and enabling us to hear things that were perhaps only half-heard before—about our society and government, our pace of life, our work patterns, our attitude to the natural world. As we gaze on Jesus the crucified one today, we might call to mind the very worst of what we have experienced this past year, all that we have lost, all the suffering we have witnessed or felt, and allow Jesus to hold and carry it, and change us through it. After all, the pandemic has enabled us to see that suffering really is universal, and that our own individual experiences of suffering and loss are somehow part of the one great suffering of all. The suffering of the pandemic has connected us and increased our awareness of our shared human predicament. The sadness and loss that I feel now is part of something bigger than me. As Lewis puts it: 'pain shatters our illusion of self-sufficiency'.

The recognition of our shared suffering is, I think, a step towards solidarity with all who suffer, and brings us a step closer to the foot of the Cross: God's great act of solidarity with a suffering and wounded and grieving world. This not just something God does for us, but something we are invited to participate in, too. Each time we gaze on Jesus the crucified one, our hearts may just become a little bit softer, a little bit more forgiving, a little bit more compassionate towards ourselves and all who suffer. Each time we gaze on Jesus the crucified one, we may just be changed a little, and better able to confront the suffering of this past year.

In his published journal of grief, *A Grief Observed*, Lewis comments: "Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape." As we gaze on Jesus the crucified one, who carries the mystery of universal suffering within himself and within the heart of God, we reflect on the long, winding valley of this pandemic, and we pray for the grace to face up the truth of things—to hear the megaphone—and to be changed. Amen.

Easter Day: Life

Back in February, when the government's roadmap out of lockdown was announced, I told my nine-year-old daughter that we might be living without coronavirus restrictions by the time of the school summer holidays. She literally jumped for joy at this news, and ran around our living room and said: 'Life! I've been waiting for you!' Seeing her reaction made me aware of just how difficult this past year has been for children and young people: how for them, in particular, it feels like life has been put on hold.

Life is the theme of this sermon—following on from the themes of love and loss, and taking inspiration from the writings of C.S. Lewis: an author with a deep understanding of the spiritual imagination of children. I would like to begin with a scene from *Prince Caspian*, the fourth book in the Narnia series, when Lucy meets Aslan again for the first time since the events in the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. She says: 'Aslan – you're bigger!'. 'That is because you are older, little one', replies Aslan. 'Not because you are', asks Lucy. 'I am not'. 'But every year you grow, you will find me bigger'. With every year of life that passes, Lucy enlarges her perception of who Aslan is—she changes and she grows; and her vision of Aslan—the Christ-figure in the story—grows bigger as she does.

Change and growth are part of life—part of natural life, as we know from the pattern of the seasons and the changing colours of our gardens in spring. Part of human life, as we know all too well from this pandemic: life seems to have changed quite fundamentally; and whatever life does look like by the time we get to the school summer holidays, we can be quite certain that life will change again; it always does.

As we celebrate the great miracle of our faith—the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the one who embodies the utter life and vitality of God—I wonder if we can also think of resurrection as change. After all, we know from eye-witness accounts that Jesus's physical appearance after the resurrection had changed. And we also know that most of his close friends reacted to the resurrection initially in the same way that most of us react to change: by running away from it, and feeling scared. 'Terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid'. They needed time to realise that resurrection is positive change—which at first they could not see, but which the risen Christ enables them to see: like Lucy, they too needed to enlarge their vision.

When I use the word 'miracle' to describe the resurrection, I really do mean it. I can't explain the mechanism of this miracle—I wouldn't dare to try. But I do believe it and trust it. It is difficult to uphold an authentic Christianity without it. As C.S. Lewis says in his book on *Miracles*: 'Christianity is precisely the story of a great miracle'. I find it helpful to understand miracles as 'signs', which is the biblical term—signs that reveal the divine presence in the physical order of things; signs that reveal the nature and character of God. The resurrection of Christ is a miracle which points us beyond the physical order of death and decay, revealing the promise of eternal life for all who follow Christ. We already have an intuitive awareness of resurrection as a general principle, through the pattern of death and rebirth we experience in nature. In the life, death and resurrection of Christ, we realise that the principle is there in nature—even human nature—'because it was first there in God'. Lewis writes, Christ 'lights

up nature's pattern of death and rebirth. God has dived down to the bottom of creation, and has come up, bringing the whole redeemed nature on his shoulder'.

I mentioned that the past year has been difficult for children and young people—difficult, too, for those families who been through the journey of pregnancy and childbirth, alongside all the restrictions and uncertainties of this time. Yet for all the challenges, there's nothing like the arrival of a new baby to remind us of the miracle of life. Today, we welcome baby Ezra into the family of the church through baptism, following in the steps of his big sister Iona who was also baptised here just a few years ago. I said that another word for resurrection is 'change', and if anything teaches you about change, it's becoming a parent. I remember sitting in a café with my husband, shortly before our daughter was born. A passer-by noticed my heavily pregnant state and said to us both: 'your lives will never be the same again'.

One book I would recommend to all new parents or godparents is called: Dear Pope Francis—the Pope answers questions from children across the world. Joaquin, aged seven, from Peru, asks this: Dear Pope Francis, Why are there not as many miracles anymore? Pope Francis replies: Dear Joaquin. *Who told you this? It's not true! There are miracles even now. Every day there are miracles, and there are plenty of them. For example, there is the miracle of people who suffer and still do not lose their faith. So many people suffer and continue to remain faithful to Jesus. This is a miracle, a great miracle But most of all there are everyday miracles—like the miracle of life ... I have seen many daily miracles in my life. Many.*

Today we celebrate the miracle of life and the birth of baby Ezra. The book of Ezra in the Old Testament arises at a point of rebuilding and restoration in the life of the people of Israel, as they return from their long exile in Babylon. As we celebrate Ezra's baptism today, we are reminded of God's promise of restoration, of renewed hope, of positive change for the future, as we return from the exile of lockdown, and move forwards from this pandemic.

Today, we celebrate the miracle of life—as we believe and trust in the resurrection; in positive change: as St Paul writes: 'we will not all die, but we will all be changed' (1 Cor. 15.51). I will leave the last word to Lewis on this. He writes: *'The miracles that have already happened are the first fruits of that cosmic summer which is presently coming on. Christ has risen and so we shall rise ... To be sure, it feels wintry enough still: but often in the very early spring it feels like that. The spring comes slowly down this way; but the great thing is that the corner has been turned. Our leader Christ is calling us. It remains with us to follow or not, to die in this winter, or to go on into that spring and that summer'.*

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

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