

Not that we loved him, but that he loved us

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on 2nd Sunday of Easter 2018

Refs: 1 John 1-2.2, John 12.19-31

It's almost certain that John the Evangelist is the writer of St John's Gospel and the two Epistles - 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. Even if we hadn't been told they were written by the same person, we might have guessed because so many words from the Epistles echo the Gospel. Today's Epistle reminds us so much of the wonderful prologue to his Gospel.

I find it interesting that only in John's Gospel do we have significant accounts of St Thomas. First, as Jesus prepared to go to see Lazarus, while the other disciples were dithering around, it was Thomas who said 'Let us go with Christ, even if it means dying with him'. Then when Jesus said 'you know where I am going', Thomas expressed what probably everyone was feeling but didn't dare say, 'We do not know where you are going so how can we know the way'. And it's only in John that we read of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in the upper room with Thomas's apparent initial unbelief,

There are comparatively few accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances. Those there are, are very different from each other. This inconsistency is one of the things that convinces many people that the resurrection was true. If you were going to make something up, you'd make sure that the false accounts all tallied with each other. And perhaps another testament to the truth of the resurrection is that it touched such a mixed bunch of people. They were each profoundly affected so that, however different they were from each other, they were all strengthened to enable the Good News of Christ to spread throughout space and time.

That Jesus' disciples included a breadth and depth of personalities, I find extremely encouraging. Yet Jesus was able to speak and inspire all of them. There was Peter - hot-headed, with his passionate desire to follow Jesus; Paul - fervent persecutor of those early Christians, but showing enormous humility in his transformation from persecutor to apostle even though he never met Jesus in the flesh; Thomas - so often criticised for voicing his doubts, but with an enquiring mind that wouldn't let him just 'accept' things without thinking deeply about them. Through him we learn such a lot - that Jesus is 'the way, the truth and the life', and his affirmation that Jesus was Lord and GOD. Thomas went on to devote his life to his Lord. And then St John - with his deep, instinctive spiritual understanding of Jesus and who he was - Word, Light, Life etc, and who recognised the value of Thomas's contribution to the developing Christian Church and so to all Christians.

The one thing that all the disciples had in common was their love of the Lord, and their conviction that they were all much loved by him, however different they were from each other. St Paul and St John particularly tell us time and time again of the love that God has for us and of how much God is prepared to do for us - Romans, 8.38 "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ our Lord", and 1.John 3.16 "in this is love, not that we loved him, but that he loved us". Today we heard John reminding us that Jesus loved us so much, that he was prepared to die for us so that we might

have a way to forgiveness of our sins. It's not that God loves us any less when we do things wrong, he loves us unconditionally. But relationship is a two-way thing, and so to be in relationship with God we must respond to him. Sometimes, maybe often, we mess up and break our relationship with him. We put barriers up, separate ourselves from God. For the Jews one way of mending this relationship was to make physical sacrifices, but Jesus showed us a different way of becoming one with him again. For the risen Christ, barriers and doors were irrelevant - he could simply pass through them. But we have to invite him to do so, allow him through. John understood this and told us that to become at one - 'atoned' with God, what we had to do was to be honest - acknowledge the things we've done wrong, and be truly sorry. So it's not a question of physical sacrifices, but emotional, spiritual ones. We are asked to give up our pride, our arrogance, to be humble and lowly. Then God in his great love, evaporates any barriers we have put up, and forgives us.

Time and time again, John encourages us that it is through Jesus that we have real life. Not just 'existence' that comes through our physical bodies, or life after death, but life here and now, that is full of joy and peace despite any physical pain or difficulties we may experience, and in spite of our failures and vulnerabilities. It's a joy and peace that come from our trust that Jesus, risen from the dead, is with us, and that, if we choose, we can be one with him, and with the Father, held and bathed in his deep love for us.

Amen