

A love-story

Genesis 12.1-4a | Psalm 121 | Romans 4.1-5, 13-17 | John 3.1-17

READING: JOHN 3.1-17

“3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ 3 Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ 4 Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ 5 Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ 9 Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ 10 Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life 16 ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’ (NRSVA)

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

SERMON

I. (LOVE) STORY TELLING

Dear friends in Christ!

This morning I would like to reflect on love stories. There are numerous iconic love stories in the history of humankind, in literature and in today's world. Hearing the names and reading headlines sometimes evokes our imaginations. For example Romeo and Juliet, Cleopatra and Mark Antony, Paris and Helen, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert¹ and of course, more recently, Harry and Meghan. These names are connected to stories of sacrifice, passion, tragedy, royalty, foolishness and obviously love, to name just a few. All this is good stuff for a Hollywood movie, isn't it? Unsurprisingly there are already many movies, serials and books connected to these topics.

Love stories are much loved by many, old and young. I suspect amongst us are many admirers of love stories. But don't be afraid. You don't have to make yourself known. You don't have to come forward. Why is the telling of love stories or simply of stories memorable? Well, humans have told stories since the very beginning of our human existence. In particular oral story telling helped humans to explain how they understood the world. Stories contain cultural traditions and values that help us to live our lives and to fill them with meaning. They can both entertain and educate us.²

The love between two people in a relationship also follows a story-line. This is what Robert J. Sternberg, a Professor of Psychology and Education at Yale University posits.³ If we

1 <https://amolife.com/infinite/top-20-most-famous-love-stories-in-history-and-literature/>.

2 <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/storytelling-and-cultural-traditions>.

3 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/articles/200007/whats-your-love-story>.

want to understand love as lived in a relationship we have to look at the stories of a couple. They are like a script in a theatre that communicates the beliefs and hopes in a relationship. For example there is a travel story-line. People say, "*I believe that beginning a relationship is like starting a new journey that promises to be both exciting and challenging.*"⁴ Another example is a gardening story-line. It goes like this, "*I believe any relationship that is left untended will not survive.*"⁵ And there are also difficult story-lines like, "*I find it exciting when I feel my partner is somewhat frightened of me.*"⁶ I fully understand why the researchers named the last story-line a horror story.

There are many more stories that guide our relationships. Sternberg explains that quite often couples split when they recognize that they simply have two incompatible stories or scripts informing their relationship. Often couples have never spoken in any depth about their views concerning their relationship. Often they have never tried to reflect on their love-stories and make them compatible.

But it is important for a long and healthy relationship that people have compatible stories. When we're unhappy with our spouses, our partners, we shouldn't look at their faults, but how our stories can lead to a place of disappointment. The partners are not identical with the pictures we have of them.⁷ Having all the above in mind let us ponder the central love-story of our faith.

II. GOD'S LOVE STORY

The booklet accompanying **Living in Love and Faith**, a process of reflection within the Church of England concerning love and relationships, states: "*The story of salvation that the Bible tells is a story of the never ending intimacy of love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*" Today's Gospel, Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus at night, according to John leads us right into the middle of this great love-story. It is no coincidence that our gospel reading today contains the most quoted verse of the New Testament John 3.16 (NRSVA):

4 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/articles/200007/whats-your-love-story>.

5 id.

6 id.

7 id.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

In this verse you find two important keywords which describe the central script of our faith. The first keywords in the text is the Verb **agapao** (*to love*). The corresponding Greek noun is **agape** (love). And the second keyword is **cosmos** (world).

In Ancient Greek there are different terms that can describe love. But John 3.16 does not use any of the common terms in Ancient Greek. Amazingly John, like the other authors of the New Testament, chooses an unusual, weak and not well used term at the time the New Testament was written. They chose agape as the main term to describe the love of God.⁸ What does agape express? Let me explain this with a quote from the late Pope Benedict XVI. who wrote in his wonderful and sensitive encyclical “Deus caritas est” (God is love):
... “this word⁹ expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.”¹⁰

Wonderful words indeed! In other words, agape means a love characterized by sacrifice that is always looking to the well being of the other. It embraces all the other forms of desire and friendship. It gives them direction and meaning.

And the object of God’s love is the world, the cosmos. The cosmos includes all the inhabitants of the world. The cosmos encompasses everything that is, all of creation. God loves everything he has made.¹¹

And the Gospel of John contains a promise that when we trust in Christ we can already have a share in the divine life here and now.

8 Mounce, Robert H. (2007): John. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Ch. D.1.b.

9 Agape (author’s note).

10 https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html (Paragraph 6).

11 Wisdom 11.24.

In Christ and with Christ is the way to the divine life that is fundamentally not marked by guilt and not limited by death. That's the heart of John's gospel. John proclaims the redemptive love of God that is at work in the world.¹² That is a wonderful love-story, isn't it? It is almost too good to be true.

III. REALITY CHECK – TODAY'S WORLD AND GOD'S LOVE STORY

It is not easy to talk about the love of God in today's world. The Christian proclamation of God's love is exactly the point where people, and even Christians, have doubts. Today's world seems to show a very different reality.

Looking back over the last century, we recall the catastrophes of two world wars, the use of atomic bombs and the planned mass murder of millions of Jews, the killing of minorities like Sinti, Roma, gays, lesbians, and political dissenters, Christians and various groups of people because of their ethnic background, and all this in the service of a murderous, dehumanizing and nationalistic ideology. We can look back on centuries of colonization (often in the name of God) whose effects are still felt and which continue to produce suffering. And on top of that the behavior of Christians obscured the message of a loving God who came and comes to meet people in Jesus Christ.

Isn't it a miracle that there are still people who sincerely believe in the story of the loving God? (Like maybe you and me!) If God is just, loving, and omnipotent, why does he allow suffering? An old and red hot question.¹³ Talking about the love of God all too often seems like a meaningless and pious formula for many of our contemporaries.

This world is still marked by guilt and limited by death. There is indeed a contradiction here that cannot be resolved which we must live into. The experiences in this world often do not seem to fit the loving God of the Bible at all. God doesn't seem to act the way many people would expect a loving God to. Because of this, people often break off their relationship with God in disappointment.

¹² Mounce, Robert H. (2007): John. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Ch. D.1.b.

¹³ <https://www.erf.de/lesen/glaubens-faq/warum-laesst-gott-leid-zu/33618-5>.

IV. LENT AS A TIME TO QUESTION THE SCRIPTS AND PICTURES OF GOD

For many contemporaries and maybe for you and me it is high time for a closer look. It is Lent, a season during which Christians are invited to examine and to contemplate their relationship with God, one another and the world.

We already heard that it is essential for a healthy long term relationship to reflect on the compatibility of the love-stories that inform our behaviors and expectations. What a great opportunity for you and me to question our images of God during this season of Lent. Often our pictures of and our stories about God say more about us than about God. God is not identical with our image of God.

The unmasking of our images of God creates the conditions for an encounter with God. And that's what love is all about, isn't it? Try to encounter the other as they truly are and not with the picture we have of them. John's Gospel suggests that trust and an encounter with God in Jesus Christ are truly the sources of our hope.

That's why it's so important to keep questioning the scripts of our love-stories. That doesn't solve the question of why there is suffering. But trusting in the compassionate presence of God, who became a human being, even in the darkest hours, can be a real source of hope that opens perspectives for the future and into which we can live.

For many of the saints and the prophets, the deconstruction of their own conceptions of God through an encounter with the loving God became a source of true hope and consolation. Job, Paul, St. Francis are just a few examples.

As I draw these reflections to a close I would like to invite you to accept a challenge for this Lent! Above all, let us question the images of God and scripts that prevent us and our fellow human beings from trusting and recognizing the loving God. For God truly loves his creation of which we are all a part.

V. PRAYER

Let me close with a prayer of Saint Francis:

Most High and Glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart. Give me a true faith, a certain hope and a perfect love. Give me a sense of the divine and knowledge of yourself that I may truly fulfill your most holy will. Amen.

Summary: The story of God in relation to His creation is a great love story. This story is told through God's sacrificial love for his creation and it is the main script for our Christian faith. In the face of the suffering and cruelty of human history, people today often find it difficult to believe in a God of love. They confuse God with the image they have of Him. People write their own screenplays, which can jeopardize their relationship with God. In order to enable an encounter with God, to make it possible, it is necessary to question one's own scripts and images of God again and again. Lent is a time when Christians reflect on their relationship with God. An encounter with God can truly become a source of hope.

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