

Lent sermon series for St Peter's, Limpsfield
Maundy Thursday, 9th April 2020, 6pm

**A journey through our humanity,
with Jesus**

Rev James Percival

Seven: **Love** *Last Supper*

Readings: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

in the Live Stream Eucharist

(see <https://www.stpeterslimpsfield.org/live-streams.html>)

in a time of national and global emergency precautions
to resist the coronavirus pandemic

Perhaps one of the most famous writings about Love is W H
Auden's poem, Tell me the truth about love:

*Some say love's a little boy,
And some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go around,
Some say that's absurd,
And when I asked the man next-door,
Who looked as if he knew,
His wife got very cross indeed,
And said it wouldn't do.*

Does it look like a pair of pyjamas,

*Or the ham in a temperance hotel?
Does its odour remind one of llamas,
Or has it a comforting smell?
Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is,
Or soft as eiderdown fluff?
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?
O tell me the truth about love.*

*Our history books refer to it
In cryptic little notes,
It's quite a common topic on
The Transatlantic boats;
I've found the subject mentioned in
Accounts of suicides,
And even seen it scribbled on
The backs of railway guides.*

*Does it howl like a hungry Alsatian,
Or boom like a military band?
Could one give a first-rate imitation
On a saw or a Steinway Grand?
Is its singing at parties a riot?
Does it only like Classical stuff?
Will it stop when one wants to be quiet?
O tell me the truth about love.*

*I looked inside the summer-house;
It wasn't over there;
I tried the Thames at Maidenhead,
And Brighton's bracing air.*

*I don't know what the blackbird sang,
Or what the tulip said;
But it wasn't in the chicken-run,
Or underneath the bed.*

*Can it pull extraordinary faces?
Is it usually sick on a swing?
Does it spend all its time at the races,
or fiddling with pieces of string?
Has it views of its own about money?
Does it think Patriotism enough?
Are its stories vulgar but funny?
O tell me the truth about love.*

*When it comes, will it come without warning
Just as I'm picking my nose?
Will it knock on my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love.*

Especially since the shifts in popular music since Auden wrote this poem in the 1930s, love has become a very popular, perhaps too popular, word; but it remains a deep mystery. Auden's wondering and exploration asks questions about love expressed in a whole different array of people, things, senses and actions. And there's the clue.

In the Eucharist on Maundy Thursday night, we enter into the three days of the Lord's death and resurrection. Our worship is usually full of actions of love:

We receive the blessed oils, of the sick, of baptism and of Chrism, with the promise of their touch and scent to impart the healing and assurance and joy of Christ;

After the example of Jesus and the disciples, we share in this ritual of foot-washing which exemplifies the giving and receiving of mutual love and service;

Jesus taught us that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we do also for the Lord.

We remember Jesus giving of himself as he shared the Jewish Passover with the disciples, and the first Christian Holy Communion;

We remember the darkness coming as, in church, we strip the sanctuary, Jesus goes to the garden of Gethsemane, the disciples get weary and finally run away, and Jesus prays that this cup will pass from him, but offers himself to God's will: as we pray in the Lord's prayer - '*Thy will be done*' (Matthew 6:10).

All these things express Jesus' love with us and among us. And our own lives, our own loving, are not separate from this love which is the source of all our love.

As in Bill (W.H.) Vanstone's example in his wonderful book, *Love's endeavour, Love's expense*, when he saw the truth about love in the actions of two bored boys on holiday transformed by giving themselves whole-heartedly to the gathering and nurturing of a garden.

We are living now through dreadful and extraordinary days. Even the Chancellor of the Exchequer yesterday - well beyond his usual brief - was emphasising the surpassing value and virtue of kindness, our dependence on one another, the vital role of charities, and charity.

There may be many other ways into this, but for us as Christians, it comes straight out of the gospels. *Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est - Where there is charity and love, God is there. (John 15:9-17); - A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another, as I have loved you. (John 13:34)*

This kindness and dependence, this love and charity whose importance are being recognised more than ever as we face this pandemic flow directly from the understanding of life and love that Jesus gives us, through the church, through the Eucharist.

This was central to my own discovery, as a young man, of finding and being found by the love of God in Christ, through the church community and worship.

It is sad that there often seem to be barriers between the love of God in and through the church, and the love that is in the world, as perennial as the grass. In our human frailty, I suppose we can all play a part in that sometimes.

But perhaps these strange and fearful and demanding days, coinciding with the strange and fearful and demanding days of Jesus' passion, give us the clue again of the truth about love.

In the need that is being made more explicit than ever for loving kindness between people, friend and stranger alike, and dependence on one another, to be paramount, and the gift and joy that flows from that.

May this coming together of actions help us to recognise afresh and to grow in confidence that the love of God is not separate from our loving actions, but reflected and expressed through them.

The mystery remains. But that is enough truth about love for us to live with, grow and flourish with, whatever we face at present or in the future. God bless us in joining in with, showing and sharing that love in our homes and in all our lives. And help us through that - as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it - to see the Christ who '*plays in ten thousand places... through the features of men's faces.*' [*As Kingfishers Catch Fire*]
Amen.