

Easter 3, Matins

Deuteronomy 7:7-13 and Revelation 2: 1-11

Father Tim Carroll

With lighter, warmer, and fuller days, going outside is something that most have been longing for after the recent few months. Going for a walk-through Holland and Kensington Park and streets with trees becoming full of leaves, you might say isn't this lovely. Although for some, they may like something different, completely away from the city, in the middle of nowhere or for others their idea of lovely may be on a busy market in a distant country or on a lively crowded beach. We all have different desires based on what we think is lovely.

This morning we hear of God's love for Israel. Does that mean that God finds Israel lovely like we might find a park on a Sunny day or a mountain top. What does it mean when God loves us? We hear the great phrase The Lord has set his heart on you. But before this Deuteronomy tells us that isn't because of they are more numerous than other people, this might keep Israel in check against any kind of smugness of thinking that they are especially lovely and they possess some quality that God prefers, something lovely. God didn't choose the Ancient people of Israel based on an inherent goodness, merit or strength, but out of love. It was because the Lord loved you. He will love you, bless you, and multiply you; what is this love, how are we to understand it? This love spoken for Israel shines on us today through Christ and as he is a light to lighten the Gentiles

The traditional Greek words for love Eros and Agape are often contrasted with each other, with some pitting them against each other, while others may wish to see the good in both understandings and that there is a unity in embracing both. Eros, where we get the word Erotic, broadly understood as something that you don't have, something you desire for its qualities. It's familiar to all of us the love between partners, friends, particular types of work or places to spend time. These have qualities that we desire and are attracted to and love. The puritans, and I can attest to this as a good Ulster man, would want to put a lid on this kind of thing, desires and chasing after things, being controlled by our passions and those of a more liberal persuasion might say we should savour this Eros, a more positive outlook of savouring those things in which we take pleasure, maybe even an antidote to a consumer consciousness, if we savoured things more we would be less compulsive and more satisfied with life.

The other word for love Agape by contrast is not attracted by particular qualities that people or other things possess, and that seems to be what Deuteronomy seems to be saying to us when it emphasises that God didn't choose Israel because they are biggest and best but out of a different kind of love. But God's love doesn't look for values. God's love creates value. God's love for us bestows value on us because God's love for us is creative. God isn't up in heaven looking down thinking 'oh I love the way you do that, you're really good at your job, or you've got your hair cut, or I like how you talk or vice versa I don't like how you do this or that, or didn't do that, or whatever it is.'

We can find it difficult when we hear that God loves us, because we think we are not lovely in the sense that we think of Eros love, we're not the best version of ourselves today, we didn't get that job, we don't seem to have any friends anymore, our partners don't treat us as they once did, we are not as good looking as we once were. We get into a mindset of thinking about qualities that God will find lovely about us.

Martin Luther says that God's love doesn't find but creates, it flows forth and bestows good. This is the love of the cross – a love that which was poured on us despite our failures to love. To stay be with us and stay with us despite our turning away. The love which God imparts is not some-thing called love but his very self which is love – a love which creative, it creates value in us and it is unmotivated – God loves us because God is love. Again Luther called this a strange love – although God's love is universal it seems to be found at times and in places that are not considered lovely, revealed in those are considered lowly – the prime example being Mary

My soul doth magnify the Lord.

And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

For he hath regarded: the lowliness of his handmaiden:

For behold, from henceforth: all generations shall call me blessed.

God was revealed in the lowly and overflows to us today.

As we hear of God's love for Israel, we are to understand a love which for most is incomprehensible – a love which is bestowed on us whether we feel we deserve or don't deserve it and other who we think deserve it or don't deserve it. Which means the Christians and the Church must witness to this love – an unchanging love which is at the heart of our trinitarian God. We are too be wrapped up in this love, not the love of what we desire or what qualities we appreciate but wrapped up, witnessing, and sharing this love that bestows value on all people no matter their background, race or nationality.

We do this in relationship – by spending time in the love which overflows from father, son, and holy spirit unto us, creates value in us, not dependant on anything we've done or haven't done and overflows to those around us. We emulate this love to our neighbour because we have received it from Him who loved us first and will do for all eternity. Amen