Reflection for 30th August 2020

Love and Denial!

The Epistle and Gospel readings bring together two kinds of Christian idealism. One speaks of love and Christian responsibility, whilst the other speaks of denial, rebuke, suffering, death and uncertainty. At first glance they seem to be an odd combination but surely that is the very point of their juxtaposition. St Paul writing to the Romans begins with the phrase let love be genuine, hate what is evil, and hold fast to what is good.

He then goes on to list all of the Christian virtues which are placed upon us as faithful followers of Jesus. The list is long, and incorporates considerable religious expectation, but expectation which is not ritualistic or pious, but rather expectations which centre on social interaction and personal integrity. This is where the list ties in to the opening phrase which centres on love being genuine.

The world would be a glorious place if every one of us could fulfil all of the expectations that Paul speaks of. It would remove all selfishness and greed and redirect the focus of our lives away from the present reality on to the spiritual realm in which and of which Jesus lived and taught whilst he lived amongst us.

That is why Peter receives such a harsh rebuke from Jesus in the Gospel story. He together with the closest followers of Jesus have just recognised him for who he is, and made the great confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi. So Jesus readjusts his teaching and now begins to prepare them for the rocky road ahead.

I have always felt rather sorry for Peter at this point, just a little earlier he had been cast as the rock on which the future church of Christ would stand, and was given the gift of proffering upon others acts of religious forgiveness, when suddenly Jesus turns on him!

“Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Ouch! One moment built up and the next cast down so heavily, what a crushing moment for him and indeed for those around him, because Jesus now begins to explain to them the second kind of Christian idealism! Denial, rebuke, death, suffering and uncertainty!

Peter responds to Jesus with denial, “God forbid it Lord!

That response is why Jesus was so harsh in his reply, for it was to suggest that the idealised world of the Kingdom which Jesus was now heralding in was not the will of God! Peter got this moment so wrong and the consequences were severe. Peter loved his Lord and hearing the message of his suffering and death was the last thing he wanted to hear, for where would the future be for Israel if this was to be the outcome of his and ultimately their own ministries.

I pause and reflect a little on my own faith journey, I love Jesus and have spent most of my adult life in his service. But what were my expectations or indeed your own when you decided to follow Jesus?

Were we looking for something better, more rewarding then perhaps we had earlier, or were we willingly prepared to deny ourselves take up our own cross and follow him regardless?

I look back and wonder about my life at times, if I had not followed Jesus where would I be and what kind of man would I have become?

Of course one can never truly know as life has a tendency to provide obstacles and unknown events upon us which fashion our lives over a period of time.

And yet I look back and think if my sister had not decided to marry and I had not had the opportunity of willingly taking my mother to church to hear her banns being read I would not be hear.

I would probably have achieved professional grade status for the electricity supply industry, and been in middle management. I already had my own comfortable home, car, and an enjoyable lifestyle, but it had nothing to do with faith at all. I was simply placing my hopes and aspirations on this physical world and the trappings which we believe bring us happiness. And yet because I did take my mother to church to hear those banns, my life was changed for ever. I was not promised prosperity but rather the opposite and yet it still appealed, why was that so? Because I knew in my heart that is what God wanted from me.

That is what we should all be considering when we think of our own response to Jesus. That is what Peter had missed, his mind was still too focussed on the here and now and on the potential positive outcomes of being a follower of Jesus that he and indeed those around him had failed to grasp the essential element of Christian idealism.

We are called to love and St Paul’s epistle to the Romans declares to us how we should seek to fulfil that calling, and yet that love as we all truly know does not come without a cost.

True love, a love which is genuine is the only love that can bring us the joy of our salvation and satisfy the intensity of all our inner spiritual desires. But does that kind of love truly exist?

In the film Maleficent, true love is defiled in the pursuit of power and prestige. The result is a curse and an eternity of sleep to one who was innocent of any transgression. The story unfolds and only loves true kiss can rescue the princess from her plight; suffering and death await and yet are transformed and renewed by a kiss from the very person who had laid the curse in the first place.

True loves kiss does exist, and it is bestowed upon us by the grace of God in and through Jesus. Love and the road to it is often arduous, painful, and at times apparently elusive, but it is always ultimately attainable, all we need to remember is that opening phrase of Romans 12:9, “let love be genuine.”

So learn to love with all your heart, be prepared to accept the cost that love will bring upon you and rejoice, for if your love is genuine, you will hate all that is evil and hold fast to what is good, and in so doing you will find yourselves ready to receive the gift of Salvation, “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.”

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