

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – 28th April 2024 - Easter 5

Readings: Acts 8:26-40
1John 4:7-21

Psalm 22:26-32
John 15:1-8

According to the third quarter investor report last year there are 3.96 billion people in the world with a Facebook services account who look at it at least once a month! The same report advises that 3.1 billion people check their Facebook account at least once a day! While all that online activity is happening algorithms track the posts, views, and likes of all users and through this develop a personal profile that generates recommendations for us about what to watch, what to buy, and what to think.

For those of us on Facebook I wonder what unsolicited adverts and suggestions have come into our feed recently, and whether we recognise the correlation between what we've searched for on Google and what comes unbidden through Facebook?

I must view quite a few music videos because I consistently have suggested video clips of musical auditions and performances! These have sometimes introduced me to songs and artists I have not heard of, and some of the songs have resonated so significantly that I've learnt them to share with others. One song introduced to me this way was *'You are the Reason'* by the English singer-songwriter Calum Scott. It is a powerful ballad about love for another person, with the chorus affirming, *'I'd climb every mountain, and swim every ocean; just to be with you, and fix what I've broken; 'cause I need you to see – that you are the reason.'*

I think those lyrics express something we all have a sense of. They suggest that love can inspire us to, literally and metaphorically, climb mountains and swim oceans to be with or assist someone we love; that there is a deep human longing to be known by, and reconciled with, another person; and, that loving relationship has the potential to give life meaning and purpose that it would not have otherwise.

The lyrics suggest one lover singing to another, but I don't think they need to be limited to this because there is potential within them for other relationships. The relationship between parent and child; between grand-parent and grandchild; between brothers and sisters; and even between ourselves and God!

With a bit of reframing I even imagine God 'singing' to us through the words of the Old Testament prophets, and through the life of Jesus: *'I'll climb every mountain, and swim every ocean; just to be with you, and fix what you've broken; 'cause I need you to see – that you are the reason!'*

'If music be the food of love, play on...' wrote William Shakespeare in the opening line of his comedy 'Twelfth Night'! A master of dramatic writing, Shakespeare explored and expressed his understanding of love in many contexts, and these include reciprocal and unrequited love; love shared between people; and love for a country or a cause. But, I am not aware of Shakespeare exploring the love we might have for God, or that God might have for us, and would enjoy hearing from you if you have some ideas about this?

In this week's reading from the New Testament reading, the letter writer uses language to express his understanding about the nature of God. In verses nine and sixteen the writer affirms, quite simply, that God is love. It's important to remember that John's letter was originally written in Greek, and that this form of Greek had at least four words which are translated into the English word 'love'. The first is the Greek word *eros* (ἔρως), which describes desire, or sexual love; the second is *phileo* (φιλία), which describes the love between close friends; the third is *storge* (στοργή), which describes the love between family members; while the fourth is *agape* (ἀγάπη), which describes a love that is given sacrificially without expectation of anything being given in return.

I think the sexual love of *eros*, expects and anticipates some sense of mutual attraction. The friendship love of *phileo* expects and anticipates the loyalty and support of those we are friends with. The family love of *storge* – anticipates the loyalty and affection of those we are related to. While *agape* – a term for love not widely used in the first century – was the word that the letter writer chose to describe the nature of God. In this, God is affirmed to be generous and to love unconditionally. If you like, whether we accept it or reject it, God loves us, because *agape* love is the nature of God.

Calling the reader and the listener, 'beloved' the letter writer suggests, *'... let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.'*

In this the writer has affirmed his belief that God is love, and that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is an expression of this love; that the ongoing work of God's Spirit in the lives of all who follow Christ is an expression of this love; and, that we are called and empowered to be people who offer such *agape* love to all we share life with.

If Facebook were able to track all our thoughts and actions, and thank God they can't do this yet, I wonder what kinds of love the algorithms would recognise in your life and mine?

Would there be generous and unconditional love for the people we share life with? Not only those we get along with easily, but for all – even those we don't get along with? Jesus seemed to do this most of the time and, however imperfectly, I think we're called to do the same.

So, in prayer now, let's give thanks for this insight about the nature of God's love, and for the love we find in Christ each day; let us also ask for help in the practice of agape love in our daily lives; and for the transformation such love could bring to the life of the world:

Holy God, we give thanks that you meet us in sacred word, and through this remind us of your love and call. We give thanks for the creativity of songwriters and singers, storytellers and poets, and ask your blessing on them all. Help us to use our own words wisely, and through your Spirit enable us to live with compassion, generosity, and joy. We pray in the name of the one who has risen, Jesus the Christ. **Amen.**