

Week 5 - The Mystery of Love and Sacrifice

Readings

- Isaiah 43.16-21
- Psalm 126
- Philippians 3.4b-14
- John 12.1-8

Starting out - To die that we may live

One of the most well-known verses in the gospels is John's assertion:

'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'.

(John 3.16)

This is how God's love for us is supremely expressed, that God sends us God's own self in Jesus, so that we can truly relate to him, because Jesus is a human being like us. Through the New Testament we learn more about the mystery of God through Jesus, as, by word and deed, he reveals more about who God is and what God wants for us.

But God's love goes much further than this. It's not just about learning how to live and how to understand the world, it is about turning ourselves around to be people who actively work with God to create God's kingdom and to be with God after our lives are done. We have to learn to die to ourselves and our selfish wants. We have to learn to sacrifice. For that destiny to be real for us, barriers of brokenness, disorder and sin have to be destroyed.

We cannot do it by ourselves. But Jesus can, and does. His life, God's life in the world, is willingly sacrificed on the cross. And we have seen what a great mystery it is, when Christians and other people of faith in all times and places, have sacrificed their lives for others.

Something to talk about - Who would you die for?

- Lots of popular love songs swear, *'I'd die for you'*. Who do you love enough to die for?
- How do you think your church could really show love and sacrifice for others?
- How would you start a conversation with someone about *'God so loved the world..?'*
- How can we live out Jesus's love and sacrifice in our own lives?

Some scripture to ponder - Extravagance and love

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

(John 12.3)

Have you ever broken a bottle of perfume or cologne, or maybe just gone into the bathroom after a young person has been getting ready for a party! Concentrated scents can take your breath away. You can smell the rich scent for days. In this scene, the hospitality of eating and drinking at the house in Bethany is overwhelmed by Mary's sacrifice of a costly fragrance with which she anoints Jesus's feet as for his burial.

When we know those we love are going to leave us, or are approaching the end of their lives, it makes us re-evaluate all our priorities. What's the last thing we can do to show our love? Surely, things like money should become the least of our problems or concerns. And yet how often we wait until the person is dead and then put our extravagance into the funeral – the flowers, the coffin and the wake.

Mary does not wait, much to Judas' disgust. She pours out the perfume to show her love for him. And Jesus pours out his life for us. God shows his extravagant love for us.

Questions

- Judas was angry. What do you think Martha and Lazarus thought about Mary's actions?
- What do you think is the significance of the cost of the perfume and Mary's act of anointing Jesus?
- How can we show more of our love to those we care about?
- If we say we love God, why don't we sacrifice more of what we have to show that love?

The Mystery of God - God so Loved the World

'Beloved, 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.'

(1 John 4.7-12)

This passage of Scripture reminds us that travelling the Lenten journey with Jesus is more than just getting together and having a time of fellowship and study. Entering into the mystery of God's love confronts us with a shocking truth – if we say we believe in God and in Jesus then we have to truly believe that God loves us enough to send Jesus to die for us. More than this, we have to show that love ourselves. If we don't, the mystery of God's own love for us cannot be made known to other people.

Do we, as Christians, truly love one another? That is a tremendous challenge, not least because there are many faithful Christians who have been hurt by their church, their Christian neighbours and friends. It's not a new issue; St Paul's letters set out his requests to people in churches to spend more time witnessing through Christian love, rather than arguing, fighting and misbehaving.

Yet the world is desperate for messages of God's love. And if the Lenten journey into the mystery of God means anything, it is that we will emerge from it with a stronger, clearer conviction of who God is and what God has done for us. And that means showing it to others in our own congregations and fellowships. It's often harder than we think; there are so many issues diluting our love, making it conditional, or sparing. What would it take to show love to the people we usually avoid, to make room for people who are least like us, to pour out, extravagantly, God's love on those who would be shocked and surprised to receive it?

Question

- What ONE thing could you do, as a church, to overwhelm your community with God's love?

Something to pray

Loving God

All too often, we come to the tomb too late,
bearing our spices, our final gifts, our loves
all the things we never said, the promises,
the things we were going to get around to.

Yet you gave us your Son that we might have eternal life.
Jesus poured out his life as Mary poured perfume.
We are drenched in your love, it cannot be stopped.
We know that we do not deserve it.

Help us not to leave love too late.
Teach us to show our love not hoard it.
Help us to be worthy of the sacrifice.

Amen

We finish by joining together in saying the Lord's Prayer.

We hope you have enjoyed this Lenten journey into the Mystery of God. We are now entering Holy Week with Jesus. Let us go forward into the Mystery of the Easter Journey.

Bible verses

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