

Prayer: O God, of us all, we thank you for giving us life. We thank you for giving us the earth and its people to live with and to love. As we remember your gifts may our faith grow ever deeper in your ways. Inspire us to follow behind you as you live out your love for all because you did it all for love. Amen.

Today is the second Sunday on our journey to the cross of Easter of the "WHY" of Easter, - why we Christians follow a God who would die for us – one of the only things that won't go away is that God says it was all done for love – of us. What love is this that reaches out **first**? That not only allows independence, but actually created it and seems to love it? That gives us our own freedom to accept or not what is offered freely; that loves no matter what mistakes we make? That is always listening for the tiniest of cries? That loves enough to say 'no' – or keep silent when we are determined on a course of action and we don't know enough not to stop. God does it all for love – and if our hearts begin to know, our minds just don't get it.

I kept coming back to two foundational themes for today. One is a change around of the service theme – so instead of our focus being 'Love for all', the sermon is: 'All for Love' And 2. Because Jesus said in verse 33 of today's reading: "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

There is a disjunction created before us because of between what is *beyond* our understanding and what is **in** our understanding. And we are created – driven to find out 'why' – we have inherited the rationalist – scientific way of being and apply it to something that is much, much older and I believe wiser – God! **God's love for all** the Bible tells us has belonged to the story from the beginning – and today we heard the story of a covenant – a promise God made with a man called Abram to be with him and his people – forever – an everlasting promise made by an everlasting God. That time span is beyond our minds!

I would remind you that how **we** read / understand this story comes to us through Jesus, **our** understanding is coloured by the story of Jesus – and so we **as Church**, look back to God's early promises to be with us as we walk to the cross of Easter and think about how in Jesus, God made that promise everlasting *again...* God is forever repeating this promise – *perhaps* because our ability to believe is limited by our minds ability to accept the truth? *Perhaps* to remember the truth?

The promise we heard today in Genesis 17 is ^{*1} what scholars call the Priestly version, the other version is in Genesis 15 and is called J (Yahwist) because scholars use the particular name of God as an identifying difference in the text. Our one today has Almighty God, the other one has YHWH God, of course the differences are much greater than a single name – it's just easiest to spot the name change which is usually carried from the ancient languages into English in translation. cV

Why we are given these stories for our thinking as we journey to the Easter Cross is because we understand the Cross belongs to God's everlasting story – and **didn't just start** with Jesus! The events of Easter and beginnings of the church as we know it, belong in the big picture of God's promises/covenants with both all creation and his chosen people.^{*1} While Abraham is the ancestor of God's special people, God's promise still applies to the 'multitude of nations' who will be his descendants (vv. 4-6).

We **believe** this promise is made real as the Church of Jesus spread from Jerusalem into the heart of the Roman Empire and beyond, as we *will hear from* the stories in Acts in the coming weeks.^{*1} We also have the links through the reference to kings being descendants of Abraham (Gen 17:7) which makes **us** who read it in the context of the story of Jesus, *think* of the final chapter of Mark where Jesus is proclaimed king by Pilate and the soldiers who mock him, and *finally* by the sign fixed to his cross (Mark 15).

So as we walk to the cross we are reminded that the story of Jesus especially his death and resurrection **is** in a context of the whole of God's creation and the entirety of God's activity as described in the Bible. God **is** involved because God loves – and always has and promise always to love – forever! And what's

^{*1} HWallace, ^{*2} Sacradise, ^{*3} J Petty, ^{*4} W Loader,

more this love is not dependent or need our understanding or agreement or permission... God does it all for love **and always has!**

But it's not without the need for our participation. Just as the covenant with Abram needed his and his peoples everlasting acceptance of the covenant, just as Abram and Sarai had name changes to highlight the promises made and accepted in equal status – we too have to accept that our participation comes with responsibility; challenges and an everlasting need to keep in our minds the **things of God** and *not* humanity. **And it's this last bit** that we struggle with – ^{*2}

J de Laar says that Jesus challenge thrown at Peter (and the other disciples – so us), the challenge that day so long ago is to allow our faith to become the driving cause of our lives – to lose our lives for the sake of Jesus and the message of God's Reign that Jesus embodied. If – **when** we do this then he says our faith moves from an intellectual activity **to a** radical, transforming, all-consuming way of being. The challenge of this, and of the Lenten journey, of course, is whether we are ready and willing to embrace this faith, or simply remain with a safer, intellectual pseudo-faith. cV

You see **Mark** was writing with the benefit of hindsight – and what he knew was that ^{*3}each time Jesus tried to explain to his disciples about 'Easter' – they just didn't understand, *didn't want to understand??* Our reading today is the first time and Jesus talks about taking up your cross. Remember they lived with people carrying their cross to be crucified on – *possibly daily*, so living **Jesus way** – and his reinforcing that if you live his way will carry your cross – had much stronger meaning for them than us! His way was not safe and needed **more** than just the mind or intellect's commitment to following him in faith.

Peter rejects the cost of living like Jesus – living the way he taught God wanted, living in / out the love of God for all and Jesus reply does two things. 1. Absolutely rejects any idea of him not following through and finishing the journey to the Cross of Easter. 2. If you can picture in your mind the scene. Peter speaks, Jesus turns around to and sees the disciples **behind** him – and then places Peter – **behind** him – literally putting Peter in his place – but of course this is a place *where he could follow*, and neatly puts Satan in place - behind Jesus and all that Jesus would do.

The place of the disciples is **to follow** – in Mark, Jesus's three 'Easter predictions all have the disciples not thinking like God / Jesus – and always thinking about being 'great / avoiding the cost of living like Jesus / wanting places of glory beside him.... This is **not God's thinking** – this is our humanity thinking! And Jesus called his disciples then – and still calls us as his disciples today – NOT to do it. He told them that day to stay behind **with his example** – not to run ahead, not to get in front, not to be first...

Do we really get that? Most of us don't – our minds take over our hearts and insist that love doesn't work and last is not the place to be. Our ears take over from our eyes so we hear the call for reason and worldly success louder than our eyes showing us what true happiness and joy and satisfaction look like.

Jesus challenges us to get in behind him to give us the **best** possible opportunity to discover our full humanity according to God's thinking! It is an alternative way of living; deliberately listening to Jesus and **following him**. It is all for our ^{*4}**gain to think** about it. This has nothing to do with our abdicating responsibility or of our being asked to do what we do not want to do, we chose.

Instead of thinking only of ourselves and believing that it is to our good to gain wealth and avoid any path which leads to suffering, we are being **challenged** to be generous, giving of ourselves, even when it may mean suffering. The first thoughts of ourselves and our good are to be set aside; instead we are to accept the way of Jesus, of self-giving love.

Then we find ourselves, our true selves. The merging of our will and being with God's will and being, and therefore with love which cares for others as well as for ourselves, **is the way** of discipleship. It is also the way to real humanness - and the way of Jesus, and ultimately also of God! **This is our God**, who in Jesus did it **all for love**. Amen.

^{*1} HWallace, ^{*2} Sacradise, ^{*3} J Petty, ^{*4} W Loader,