



John 10.11-18
1 John 3.16-24
25th April 2021

Love's Story Love's Shape

Minister: Gracious God, we open the bible
and long to receive your word.

All: **Open, we pray, our minds**
and hearts to receive that word
with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.

Introduction to the theme

Part of what we do, what we delight to do I think, week by week in our services, is to try to tell each other the story of who we are.

We are helped in that weekly task by the hymns we sing and the lectionary readings we hear. Both help in this ongoing, essential process of self-definition.

And in this we connect with a story that is bigger than AFC but one that AFC is part of, the Judaeo-Christian tradition that has moulded us.

I guess Patron Saints do this for countries and churches. I rather like the last sermon preached by St David of Wales when he said: *Do the little things well.* I'm just not sure there was too much to hang on to, either to remember or quote, last Friday on St George's Day! Yet a church like St Martin's in Trafalgar Square often defines itself in following in his footsteps as they recall the story of him giving his cloak to a beggar one cold snowy night. Their ministry to London's homeless couldn't wish for a more inspirational patron saint.

Well, what was the story being told amongst those who first heard John's words. It's thought that John's gospel was first circulated around 90 -100 AD. Put together, probably, by a Johannine School

of authors, the gospel, in telling both the story and message of Jesus, helps define a fledging church that has had to get to grips with what it means to live in this, sometimes, fierce Greco-Roman world, and how complicated it was to emerge from a Jewish tradition and now sit in a newly framed 'Christian' one.

Ten years on and the letter of John arrives on the scene and things have changed. The story is now being retold slightly differently because the then current threat came from a new direction, from within. Chapter two of John's first letter is about dealing with a divided church in which people fall out over the idea of who Jesus really was.

In 2012 when I was inducted here on a dark November afternoon some old friends from previous churches joined us for the service. As one couple left, they told me how much they appreciated the cross hanging centrally in the Sanctuary. It had meant a great deal to them to see it there and they wanted to tell me how appropriate they thought it was.

Well, it is significant isn't it, that by and large the symbol of Christianity is a cross and, indeed, in today's reading John points his readers to it with the words: *This is how we know what love is: Christ gave his life for us.* It's the message of Good Friday and that's why we hear it again during this Easter season.

John says to a Church that is struggling with its identity that the cross speaks to us about who Jesus is and how he lived and died. And this 'who' and 'how' about Jesus is a story that we must keep on telling ourselves because it is the most important way we define ourselves.

William Vanstone was an Anglican cleric from the second half of the 20th century who did something similar in his own 21 years of ministry in a Lancashire parish just above Manchester.

He was something of an intellectual but never took up the teaching jobs offered him by Oxford and Cambridge. Instead, compelled by the love of God he saw in Jesus Christ, he chose to live far away

from those rather gilded Ivory Towers of academia, and he gave himself to the people of his urban parish. In 1977 he published a poem which has been turned into a hymn called Love's Endeavour at Love's Expense. One verse goes like this:

*Love that gives gives ever more,
Gives with zeal, with eager hands,
Spare not, keeps not, all outpours,
Ventures all, its all expends.*

He's talking, is William Vanstone, of the cross. That's the story he told his Lancashire congregation. The story of a loving God expressed in the death of a self-giving Jesus. It's the story at the centre of our faith and it defines who we are.

LOVE'S STORY LOVE'S SHAPE

By the time John's letter reaches its readers the life of Jesus is already two generations in the past. Eyewitnesses had, or were, passing away which meant that the collective memory was beginning to fade. 1 John chapter 3 seeks to stir that fire and let the flames dance again.

Most movements, in about two generations, morph into institutions, some bearing little resemblance to the original dreams of their founders.

So, in the context of chapter two and so many people leaving the church over disputes surrounding the identity of Jesus, John attempts in chapter three to place the cross as a central and defining moment in the story of Jesus. Love's Story is the Jesus' Story, and the Jesus' Story leads to a cross of sacrificial love.

The cross is an iconic emblem for Christians. It might even be viewed as sacramental as it speaks of something so eternally profound and universally deeper than the events of just one day.

The message of the cross here in the Epistle of John is not, essentially, one of atonement. Instead, it becomes the ultimate

expression of love over hate.

Jesus, like we all do, had a choice that first Easter. He need not have stood by the poor, the excluded and the ignored. He could have 'rowed back' on all that Kingdom of God teaching he'd preached about in Galilee. In doing so he might have saved himself but lost every drop of integrity that had so characterised his three years of ministry.

So he remained silent, rather than capitulating before Pilate and took the cross instead of his own freedom.

That's Love's Story, says John. It defines Jesus as it can, and should, define us. It's as if he is saying: Don't let the cross fade. Remember it in your worship and honour it in your service.

I love the fact that we can use that word, 'service' in two ways. When we come together to sing and pray, we call it a service. And then, when we leave, going out to show loving kindness in action, we too call that service. It's as if there really is no dividing line between the two, one is an extension, a manifestation of the other. What we sing about in church is what we care about out in the world.

So, John says: *This is how we know what love is: Christ gave his life for us.* But, of course, he doesn't stop there and goes on: *And we, in turn, must give our lives for our fellow Christians.*

Now, perhaps to a modern ear that sounds a little inward looking. Is he only advocating we be generous to fellow church members? Well, although he is specifically talking about that, he isn't, by the same token, saying such loving is exclusively reserved for the Church. After all, wouldn't that be a contradiction of that well known verse of his from the gospel about God loving the world so much?

Yet, as one commentator I read pointed out. It's often easier to love those 'far away', than really love those close at hand.

The test, the real down to earth test, for the readers of John's letter

was loving the people next to them in church. And it's still a challenge for us today – and at this point in the sermon I advise you not to look around you!

In all this John doesn't appeal to vague principles or abstract theories. Instead, he quotes a real story and the lived experience of Jesus. For His story is Love's Story and it needs to become ours too.

Finally, this morning these verses tell us something of Love's Shape in our lives in that verses 19 and 20 of 1 John 3 are a process that many of us go through.

John starts off by talking of our consciences condemning us.

There can be a lot of guilt around when it comes to faith and religion. All of us can feel inadequate at times, yet I always sense it's a tragedy when church or prayer turns such a sense of inadequacy into something deeper and more permanent. Having a right and balanced view of ourselves is one thing. We need to acknowledge our weaknesses and own our frailty especially when this aspect of our life damages the life of someone else. Repentance, confession, forgiveness and renewal are life giving moments.

Yet to have a conscience that makes us self-loathing, guilt ridden or permanently subservient is not to be in a good place.

John says: *...when conscience condemns us, God is greater*

How does the hymn put it:
*For the love of God is broader
than the measures of our minds
And the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.*

The process of verses 19 and 20 that reveal the shape of God's love in our lives is that we can, because of that love, move in our self-perception to a life that is not diminished but affirmed by God.

God's grace and mercy is a gift to us when we fail and fall. In a continuously loving process God lifts us up and helps us to live a full and confident life in the orbit of his love and grace.

Church, faith, and prayer should not drag us down into permanent guilt but lift us up into a better, deeper, and kinder understanding of both ourselves and others.

During this post Easter season we often think of those meetings Jesus had with his guilt-ridden disciples. And in those life-giving encounters Jesus shows us that the shape of love is forgiveness.

He, and they are honest and perceptive enough to acknowledge their failures. Yet that would only ever be half the process. Jesus holds out the hand of forgiveness and reinstates those who have tripped up. The spirit of true resurrection hovers over their now healed relationship as it deals with the past and offers fresh hope for the future.

This way of loving and sharing forgiveness needs to shape the way we treat each other at AFC. It's a word to any church and at any point in history.

In the twenty centuries since this letter was first read the message it contains has always been relevant: Love's Story and Love's Shape is to be found at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So may the Spirit of Jesus be our constant inspiration and guide today and always. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 9th April 2021