

For your sake

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

Do you remember the chocolate-toffee sweets advert from many: Do you love anyone enough to give them your last Rolo? An artist sketches two little cartoon children where one, realising she has come to the end of her sweets, offers her last Rolo to her little boyfriend. 'Do you love anyone enough to give them your last Rolo?'

The giving and receiving of gifts is a trait found in the animal world, as well as in human society. Gifts are offered to show appreciation. Gifts are offered as bribes. Gifts are offered to show love. Gifts are given at important times in life: birthdays, weddings, graduations, anniversaries, Christmas, Harvest, Easter. At Baptism we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Giving is what we promise to do when we become communicant members of the Church where we promise to give a fitting proportion of our time, talents and money for the work of God's Kingdom.

Giving is part of the DNA of our faith because it is part of the DNA of God. Last Sunday we heard those familiar words from John's Gospel: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son..."ⁱ

We sing at Christmas time the words of Christina Rossetti:

*What can I give Him, poor as I am,
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man I would play my part,
Yet what can I give Him, give my heart.*

It is more blessed to give than to receive is drummed into us from a very early age.

One of the many interesting points of discussion that we had last week in the online Lent Studies that our probationer Conor has organised led us to consider how can there be any giving if there is no receiving. What happens if we, who are happy to give, called to give, obliged to give, honoured to give, have to become the receivers? How do we cope when Jesus, approaching the end of His earthly life, tells His disciples and His followers that His death will be soon, and that He will be giving His life as a sign of God's great love for the world, and for us. That He will be doing this, "for your sake." He'll be doing this for you, and for me.

It's part of the great arc of justice and mercy, of forgiveness and love, of promise and hope that is found in the prophecy of Jeremiah where we are told that God's love and God's law will be written on our hearts so that we may know God, and may remember that we will be forgiven as God's gift to us. And should we forget, or rather, when we forget, God's gift of Jesus, 'for your sake', is there to remind us again and again how far and deep and wide God's love will go. Inexhaustible, undeniable. Waiting there for us, if only we would listen; if only we would see; if only we would accept.

"Our contribution to this encounter (with God) is to let it happen, to remove obstacles and clear the way. It is something like drawing back your bedroom curtains on a summer morning, and letting the light come into your room. You do not have to search for the light, it is already there, pressing up against the curtains, seeking a way in."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Oh", but we say to God, "I don't want to be a burden. I couldn't possibly accept. I do not deserve it. I don't want to be beholden." Isn't that such a typical reaction on the part of humanity, to try to dilute, or distance, or displace God's love? Perhaps because we don't quite trust God. Perhaps because we don't like relinquishing control. Perhaps because we have become so inured with the idea of living by our own rules, being so utterly self-sufficient and self-reliant that we think we don't need anyone else. Maybe that we don't even need God. "I'll be fine", we say, when we're not. "I'll be fine", is our response to Jesus', "for your sake...."

One of the salutary lessons a year of lockdown has taught me is that I'm not as independent as I thought I was. That my life, and my future is part of an intricate network of relationship and support and economy that I knew was there, but I had not fully appreciated just how 'there', how 'present' it was. Those closing lines from the poem, 'Invictus', by William Ernest Henley rolling around in my head and heart:

*I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

But I'm not, and nor is any of us. God saw our needs, sees our needs. Our constant struggles, our genuine attempts, our drifting, and our coming back, our resignation, and our rebirthing hope, and says, in Jesus, 'for your sake', I'm here. I'm always here. Let's work together. You're not beholden. You're not of no value.' "I have called you by name, you are mine."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The seed of grain will die, Jesus will die, 'for your sake', but in His dying, the gift of life, of new beginning, of hope,

will come. What Jesus is saying to us, in this darkling, jangling time for Him in Jerusalem, and over the millennia to this very moment today, is that all of this, all His teaching, all His healing, all His sacrifice, all His tears, all His laughter, all His love, it's for you. It's 'for your sake.'

Maybe the enormity of this gift, not given to embarrass us or to shame us or to oblige us or to make us feel resentful or awkward because we cannot reciprocate, maybe the enormity of this gift is so great that, overwhelmed, we simply accept it. We simply say thank you.

This great emptying of God, of all His love, for our sake in Jesus, on the cross, by the empty tomb. To it we simply say, thank you.

And in our gratitude and acceptance, something changes. This is not a transactional relationship: God gives this, we must give that. This is 'grace'. This is a gift of wonder that should make us realise just how much God loves us. Not because we deserve it, not because we've earned it, not that we should try to respond to it in the best way we are able, but that first, we accept, and say, 'thank you.' The voice from heaven confirms Jesus' entire ministry, so that even if we cannot quite make out all the words and all the meaning, the effect of Jesus, on us, and in us, and through us, is something understood, and felt, and transformative.

What do we have to offer God, and by extension to those around us? We're not called to out-give God, but in that transformation, when, by grace, we accept the gift of life, and hope, and light and love that Jesus embodies, then we find ways to respond, ways to be, in our living. It will vary depending on who we are and what our circumstance is. At the Lent study last week someone said, 'Nothing more is expected than for us to be the best husband or wife or partner. The best parent or son or daughter. The best friend or colleague or neighbour. The best Christian...that we can be.' What wonderful, heart-stopping, life-affirming, spirit-soaring words. In response to the gift that is, 'for your sake', be the best that you can be.

The lockdown, this challenging, hollowing out time of sacrifice, and denial, and isolation, of private tears and public frustration, has been with us for a year. When we emerge, we will not go back to the way things were, we have been changed. The world has been changed. In the midst of what has been for many a time of darkness and depression, Jesus speaks, reminding us of the great promises of the Old Testament, which should be written on our hearts. Reminding us of

God's active, searching, waiting, reaching love. God sees us. God see our needs, and God says, all of this love that I have, truly, really, it's all for your sake.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ John 3:16

ⁱⁱ Stephen Verney, *Into the New Age*, in *The Little Book of Lent*, p99

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 43:1