

## Sermon for the Launch of Living God's Love

Bishop Alan

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> January 2010  
John 1. 29-42

### Living God's Love

One of the loveliest verses in the Old Testament is found in the Prophet Isaiah where God says to his people 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands' (Isaiah 49.16).

Many people think that God is remote, living far away from us in the heavens removed from our daily lives. But this verse speaks of a God who knows us and who loves us, just as a mother loves her little baby – and there's no stronger love than that. This is the God who binds himself to us in a covenant - a sure and enduring commitment - of love and fidelity. He holds out his hands to welcome us into his loving embrace.

Yesterday hundreds of Christians gathered in the Cathedral to launch Living God's Love - our new vision for the Diocese of St Albans, which builds on the success of Vision for Action.

But what does it mean for us to 'live God's love' today? It begins when we respond to his open hands which are beckoning to us to go deeper into God – to discover more of the beauty, the holiness, the grace and the truth of the God who has made us and who wants to draw us to himself.

When you meet someone whose life is deeply rooted in God there is something both immensely attractive about them but also something that makes you stop and pause. Attractive because the grace of God has so worked in and through them that they are no longer driven by their personal ambitions.

They don't have to impose on others or to justify themselves. They have an inner freedom and contentment that is almost tangible. They have an openness to others and a transparency of goodness which draws us in.

But such people can also be daunting because when we meet them we come face to face with an example of what God can do in you

and me if we dare to open ourselves up to his grace. But that might involve change and that can be threatening.

We are told that Jesus had that same combination. He was both attractive yet there was also something daunting about him. Crowds flocked to him because they recognised something in him that spoke of the presence of God. John the Baptist instinctively knew that this was someone very special. He points to Jesus and said, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!'

It's a strange thing to say – to call Jesus 'the Lamb of God' but it looks forward to his crucifixion, to the time when those young carpenter's hands will be nailed to the cross, his palms scarred by rough nails.

For Jesus, going deeper into God's love was costly, it involved a real dying to his own ambitions and allowing God to raise him to new life. It is this same dying to self which leads us deeper into God. We will never even begin to understand the love of God except through the cross.

The cross reminds us that we are imperfect human beings. However hard we try we can never become holy enough in our own strength to enter into the presence of God. There is no ladder of good works which reaches up high enough to get us into heaven. But the wonderful thing about the cross is that we don't have to embark on a process of self improvement. We don't have to pretend to ourselves or to others that we are especially good or holy or pious. We don't have to climb up to God, because he has already clambered down to us.

When we know – deep in our guts - that God reaches out to us, that we are his beloved children, then we can joyfully abandon ourselves into his love. As the old hymn puts it

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast,  
unmeasured, boundless, free!  
Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over  
me!  
Underneath me, all around me, is the  
current of Thy love  
Leading onward, leading homeward to Thy  
glorious rest above!*

And then there's transforming communities – if we are going to Live God's Love then we cannot hold on to it for ourselves. The love of God has to flow out, touching the lives of those

around us. Jesus did just this as he reached out his hands to those around. We are told

'Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them' (Matthew 19.13) and

'At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them ' (Luke 4.40).

As I have been travelling around the diocese I have witnessed many places where Christians are lending a hand and making a real and tangible difference.

This has always been the defining feature of the Christian faith. There has been some fascinating research undertaken by an American academic, Rodney Stark, into the way that Christianity took the ancient world by storm in the first three centuries. Very often historians say that the reason that Christianity grew was because of the promise of a better life after death. Having reviewed all the ancient sources Rodney Stark concluded:

The power of Christianity lay not in its promise of other-worldly compensations for suffering in this life, as has so often been proposed. No, the crucial change that took place in the third century was the rapidly spreading awareness of a faith that delivered potent antidotes to life's miseries here and now! The truly revolutionary aspect of Christianity lay in moral imperatives such as 'Love one's neighbour as oneself'...These were not just slogans. Members did nurse the sick, even during epidemics; they did support orphans, widows, the elderly, and the poor; they did concern themselves with the lot of slave. In short, Christians created, "a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services".<sup>1</sup>

Of course, we cannot do this alone. There are so many challenges and opportunities that we could easily be overwhelmed. But by joining hand with Christians of other denominations – and indeed with anyone of goodwill – we can make a real difference

And then there is making new disciples.

When John the Baptist pointed Andrew and his companion away from himself and directing them towards Jesus, they found him with hands outstretched, inviting them 'Come'.

We do not make new disciples by asking people to join a religious club. Instead we have to point people away from ourselves: 'See, the lamb of God' and we direct them to Jesus Christ, who stands with open hands ready to welcome them.

Making new disciples is not simply a recruitment drive because we want a bigger church. It is handing on the baton of the faith to the next generation. Henri Nouwen said that when we share our faith we need to

- ✓ Remain convinced without being rigid
- ✓ Willing to confront without being officious
- ✓ Gentle and forgiving without being soft
- ✓ A true witness without being manipulative
- ✓ Conveying above all else in our very presence the love that is Christ

We are to so witness and pray that others will catch the vision of what it is to Live God's Love with open hands.

As we launch Living God's Love will you respond to the welcoming hands of God to go deeper into his love. Will you go out in his name with open hands? And will you work with me in making new disciples, pointing others to Jesus Christ, the One who alone can quell our fears and fulfil our deepest hopes?

Before you leave this service today you will be given a prayer card. Please keep it somewhere safe and use it regularly as we pray

Living God,  
draw us deeper into your love;  
Jesus our Lord,  
send us to care and serve;  
Holy Spirit,  
make us heralds of good news.  
Stir us, strengthen us,  
teach and inspire us  
to live your love  
with generosity and joy,  
imagination and courage;  
for the sake of your world  
and in the name of Jesus,  
Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stark, R (2006) *Cities of God*, San Francisco: Harper, p. 30-31. In his book *The Rise of Christianity* (1996, Harper Collins), Stark gives some fascinating statistical analysis showing the impact of this altruist behaviour on church growth, pp. 86-93.