Lent Values: Love – Sacrifice:  John 3:16, John 15:12-14, Ephesians 5:2

The Bible Passages:

John 3:16

“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 15:12-14

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Ephesians 5:2

Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Some Reflections:

These three passages from scripture look at love in a particular “Christian” way; love as sacrifice. The secular view of love takes on board passion, commitment and self-giving at its highest, but tends to stop short of self-sacrifice, and is self-centred at its lowest, such as in the “eros” love that dominates much of modern “pop” music and the “pop” culture. In the 1st century world the concept of sacrifice was quite familiar, whereas these days the idea of something or even somebody being sacrificed to a deity seems strange. In the 1st century world there were many temples to many gods, and going to the temple to offer up a sacrifice to the gods was a regular act, especially before embarking on something demanding or risky, like a long journey. Of course in the Jewish faith the idea of sacrifice was at the heart of religious practice; the law lay down the rules and regulations that had to be observed. For instance a sacrifice had to be offered at the Temple after a mother gave birth to a child; a woman was believed to have become unclean through the process of birth and so would have to go and offer a sacrifice to be made clean again in God’s sight; we see this happening with Mary after the birth of Jesus when Joseph and Mary take go to the Temple to offer the sacrifice of “ a pair of doves or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:22-24).

The most important of all the sacrifices offered in the Jewish Faith were those offered on the Day of Atonement to cleanse the people from their sins when the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies to atone for the people’s sins. However the only sacrifice that would really work in God’s sight was not animal for man, but man for man. It is that sacrifice that Jesus is referring to in his words from John 15 where he speaks of laying down one’s life for one’s friends. God wants people to be clean in his sight, and because love is at the heart of his being (see 1 John 4:16) he approaches the idea of sacrifice from the direction of love; out of love for humanity God provides the sacrifice in the person of
his only Son; not expecting us to provide the costly sacrifice but doing so himself; that is the theme of John 3:16. This act of love is not just in the heart of God the Father, it is there also in the heart of the Son, for Jesus freely offers himself in love as the sacrifice; it is that freely offered sacrifice Jesus is hinting at in John 15:13, and it is the underlying theme of Paul's words to the Ephesians in Ephesians 5:2.

Sacrificial love is a love that is demanding, committed and costly – to the point of giving of one’s self in totality; this is a very radical form of love. In fact we can say that that sacrificial love is Cross-shaped. The Cross is the ultimate symbol of sacrificial love, for there Jesus died an undeserved, painful death, pouring out his life on our behalf for no other reason than that he loved us. Also the Cross shows us that God's love is limitless; it embraces all humankind.

Sometimes we need another picture to help us into the one we are seeking to understand so here is an account of a more recent loving, sacrificial act. On 25th May 1971 a terrorist dumped a bomb in the hall of a police station in Belfast. Sergeant Michael Willetts of the Parachute Regiment entered the hall and held the door open to allow adults and children to escape. He then stood in the doorway, shielding those taking cover. The immense blast killed him. Michael was awarded the George Cross for his bravery. The official register states: “By this considered act of bravery Sergeant Willetts risked, and lost, his life for those of the adults and children.” This man proved his love for his neighbour by dying for them, God proved his love for us by sending his Son, his Son proved his love for us by giving his life.

From the hymn “When I survey the wondrous cross” by Isaac Watts:

See from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingling down:
did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an off’ring far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

Questions for Discussion

1. The measure of love set out by Jesus- “as I have loved you”- is beyond measuring, but nevertheless it does provoke the question; how far would we go in our love? If we are following the example of Jesus should we be setting any limits?

2. Jesus’ Sacrifice of love was seen in heaven as a “fragrant offering”; in other words as an act of worship towards God the Father, that is the gist of what Paul is saying to the Ephesians. If we are loving after the example of Jesus, what acts of love can be seen as acceptable acts of worship, “fragrant offerings” to God?

3. How can looking at the Cross and seeing it as the measure of God’s love for us take us deeper with God?

4. If loving sacrificially means loving with real generosity, that always gives and expects nothing back, can we love our enemies as well as our friends?
Ideas for Action

Each person to jot down

- One thing that has stuck me
- One act of love that I am going to do
- One thing I will pray about this week

Prayer:

We begin our prayer by taking time to look at the Cross and give thanks for the love of God in Jesus Christ for each of us.

Cross shaped love is giving in love without limit. Who do we know who is unloved or difficult to love? Let us ask God for the strength and compassion to actively love them?

Loving our enemies is tough, but it is the outworking of sacrificial love. Let us ask God to help us love our enemies and to pray for them.

Close:

finish by saying the Collect together, followed by the grace:

Lord Jesus Christ,  
you have taught us  
that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters  
we do also for you:  
give us the will to be the servant of others  
as you were the servant of all,  
and gave up your life and died for us,  
but are alive and reign, now and for ever. Amen

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.