

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Greatest Love

“No-one can have greater love, than to lay down his life for those he loves.” My following of Christ this week must be the closest I can manage; because now I enter into the greatest act of this greatest love, and accept it as something done for me.

The Beloved Disciple

It is one of the great graces of the Fourth Gospel that it never attaches a name to the mysterious “disciple Jesus loved”. He first appears in ch. 13, at the Last Supper. No other Gospel makes mention of such a special person, and so there’s a certain intentional vagueness about this figure. But he is quite real: he is the one who was “known to the High Priest”, and so has a certain amount of pull in priestly circles; he is sitting next to Jesus at the Last Supper; he is *not* one of the Twelve; he is not the Fourth Evangelist, but the teacher whose memories and expressions furnish the contents of that sublime Gospel. The fact that he remains unnamed is at first annoying to us, but then it appears to mean more: after all, the things which are written in “his” Gospel are written *so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name*. In other words, we are to be the disciples Jesus loved, always first in perception, in generous response, in willingness to bear witness.

Loving And Being Loved

It’s wonderful to be in love, but suppose you aren’t loved in return? That is quite devastating. We think “unrequited love” is the worst kind of pain; but think for a moment. Look at the shape of the redemption: Jesus loved us - as the Father loved us - even before we could make any response; and even after we’ve made a response of refusal: even when we have responded negatively, God loves us. The great privilege that we realise, when this dawns on us, is that we can love in the same way ourselves. Between human beings, love infallibly makes its own mark, being eternal and endless; *love does not come to an end*. Even if it never elicits one iota of response, it can never be extinguished. Even if I say “I hate those who love me”, I have no power to reach into them to turn off their love. The last great freedom of a lover is the freedom to continue loving, the freedom to be faithful. In this there is the secret love that lays down its life, which is utter generosity. It’s true that love that is *shared*

displays its miraculous, life-giving, liberating elements, here and now, in humanly recognisable terms; but the love that is at the heart of the Universe - divine Love, the truest Love of all, is habitually refused, rejected, or disregarded, *and yet is eternal*. In his dying, Jesus is beside all who love; but he is especially close to the ones who love without reward – without reason, onlookers would say – and if we think of the Beloved Disciple as one who knew this fact – after all, it is to him that we owe the saying about *no greater love* – we might be enabled to discern him in many lives which have intimately shared this precious knowledge.

Not Just One Of The Crowd

We should have a burning desire to be with the Church in the great days of Holy Week. It is not as irrelevant extras that we join the population of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We are here in the character of that unnamed Disciple, walking anonymously after Jesus, bonded to him by unseen closeness. All the saints have walked this Way of the Cross before us, and we come today to be in their company. Our liturgy gives us many ways to follow closely, to miss nothing of what is said and done in the last hours of Jesus of Nazareth. Nothing that we are told can be negligible, everything can help to build us up in faithfulness and love. It is a huge privilege to be a Christian in these days; it is marvellous to take our part in reading and singing the Word, in celebrating the Sacraments, in receiving the divine ministry of the Son of God, as he moves among us in the pattern of his passion and death, until we greet him once more on Easter Night, risen himself, and bestowing risen life on those who love him. We must take the ordinary practical steps that will enable us to come with him. We should be sure that we come out of love, in readiness for his gifts, and in his own obedience to the Father, we should learn to be like him, and (in the Gospel’s words) to lose nothing of all the Father has given us.

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