

God's Beloved Son. Bethesda Meditation. 18 May 2008.

Hymn :

'Our God, whose justice did awake
The sword against Thy Well-beloved,
Thou didst Thine own dear Son forsake,
To mercy by His cries unmoved.

Thy perfect image, Thy delight,
He ever had beheld Thy face;
Thy bosom was, of native right,
His proper, secret dwelling-place.

Yet was the Lord made flesh, and nailed
By men, His creatures, to the tree;
By all the powers of hell assailed,
And bruised and pieced, and slain by Thee!¹

My reading this morning comes from John's gospel, chapter 5, verse 20 – the words of the Lord Jesus to the Jews: 'The Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing'.

As you know, the Bible speaks on several occasions of the outstanding love of a father for his son. Indeed, the very *first* occurrence of the word 'love' in the Bible is connected with one notable example – that of Abraham's love for Isaac.² Again, even if we *may* question the wisdom of *how* he demonstrated his love, we might think of Jacob's love for Joseph.³ And, again, although we would *certainly* quarrel with the way in which King David indulged and doted on Absalom, scripture leaves us in no doubt about either the reality or the depth of his love for his wayward son.⁴

But I hardly need to say that *no earthly father* has ever felt affection for *his son* remotely resembling the love which God the Father feels for *His Son*. And although, in *one* sense, God has *many sons* – both by *creation* (I refer to the angels) and by *adoption* (I refer to believers) – He has never had another like 'the Son' of whom our text speaks – who stands altogether alone as His unique and eternal Son.⁵

Nor has He – the Father – left us in *any* doubt about the extent of His affection for His Son. Indeed, at our Lord's baptism, God threw the heavens wide open – 'rent them apart' is the expression used in one of the gospels⁶ – that He might declare, 'You are my beloved Son' – or, more literally, 'You are my Son, the beloved'.⁷ And more or less identical words were echoed some three years later on the so-called 'Mount of Transfiguration', when, we are told, 'a voice from the cloud said, This is my Son, the beloved'.⁸

And, if God's declaration *at our Lord's baptism* distinguished Him (the Lord Jesus) from *some of the worst* of men – come to be baptised in token of their repentance – God's declaration *on the Mount* distinguished Him from *two of the best* of men – Moses and Elijah. And, if God's declaration *at our Lord's baptism* followed the 30 years He had lived in *private* at Nazareth, God's declaration *on the Mount* followed the subsequent three years of His *public* ministry.

And I note that both of these assertions by the Father are recorded for us by each of the first three gospels.⁹ But, if, in this way, for their part, the writers of *these* gospels focus on the Father's *expression* of His limitless love for His Son,¹⁰ for *his* part, John, in his gospel, stresses rather our Lord's own constant and conscious *enjoyment* of that love.

In the opening section of his gospel, the apostle John speaks of Him (our Lord Jesus) as God's only-begotten 'in the bosom of the Father'¹¹ – in, that is, the place of warmest affection and most intimate communion ... as the One who occupied love's eternal abode – ever dwelling in the embrace of the Father's love.¹²

And it is clear that our Lord's enjoyment of that love continued *undiminished* when He was in the world.

We are exhorted in Jude 21 to 'keep' ourselves 'in the love of God'¹³ – to keep ourselves from anything which would cloud our awareness of God's love – to walk continually in the warmth of its glow.¹⁴ Alas, speaking for myself, all too often I stray into the shadows! But, make no mistake, throughout the *whole* His life and ministry here my Lord *never once* 'strayed into the shadows'. He was forever basking in the sunshine of His Father's love.

Indeed, we hear the Saviour refer to His Father's love for Him no less than six times in John's gospel – of which we read the first – from chapter 5, '**The Father loves the Son**, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing'. These words of our Lord are similar in many ways to that which is said back at the end of chapter 3 – verse 35 –

'**The Father loves the Son**, and has given all things into His hand'¹⁵ – which words were either those of John the Baptist, or, rather more likely I suspect, those of John the apostle.

But, if *John* (whichever) assures us in chapter 3 that, because the Father loves the Son, He has placed all in His hands – in other words, that the Father has *withheld* from Him no possessions – *our Lord Himself* assures us in chapter 5 that, for the very same reason – the Father's love for His Son – He (the Father) has shown Him all He does – in other words that the Father has *withheld* from Him no knowledge.¹⁶ The Father kept no secrets from the Son of His love – and, because, in His daily communion with His Father, our Lord Jesus saw *all* that *God* was doing *and* all that God would have *Him* do, His (our Lord's) activity, He claimed, was always a perfect reflection of His Father's.

The second reference which our Lord made to His Father's love for Him comes from the well-known passage in chapter 10 ... verses 17 and 18 of which record His words, 'For this reason **the Father loves me**, because I lay down my life that I may take it again. *No one* takes it from me (no power in Jerusalem or in Rome; no power on earth or in hell could ever do that!) ... *no one* takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have *power* to lay it down,¹⁷ and I have *power* to take it again. *This commandment* I have received from my Father'. And our Lord rejoiced to know that His unqualified submission to His Father's will and command ... His undeviating obedience right to the point of death¹⁸ ... served to call out – to draw out – His Father's love for Him.

And what can we possibly say in response to His third reference to His Father's love for Him – recorded in chapter 15 verse 9 ... '**As the Father loved me, I also** have loved you'?¹⁹ – when the beloved Son, who alone knew the immensity and the intensity of *His Father's* love for *Him*, assures us that nothing short of this is the measure of His *own* love for *us*?

Such a breathtaking claim can be matched *only* by words our Lord later uttered in prayer – in chapter 17 verse 23 – when He told His Father of His *own* purpose 'that the world may know that *you* ... have loved them (have loved all who believe on *Him*, that is²⁰) **as you have loved me**'. What an amazing thought! – that the Father's limitless love for His Son overflows in all its fullness to every last one of His people.²¹

And in the following verse the Saviour embraces, as it were, two eternities, 'Father ... I will (I desire)', He said, 'that they ... be with me ... that they may behold my glory which you have given me; for **you loved me before the foundation of the world**'. And here, as our Lord reaches back before creation itself, our finite minds are baffled – as one commentator says, 'This love must be very old if the eternal Son could not remember its beginning'!²²

And the final reference comes in the closing words of our Lord's prayer²³ – as the last grains of sand were trickling through the timer before His rendezvous with my sins and God's wrath²⁴ – 'I have declared to them your name, and will declare it, that **the love with which you loved me** may be in them, and I in them'.

And it is as we consider the significance of the bread and cup this morning that the sheer wonder of all this strikes us – that He whom the Father loved *so very much* is one and the same as He of whom Paul once said, God 'did not spare *His own Son*, but delivered Him up for us all'.²⁵ And those last three words, 'for us all', surely remind us of what Isaiah wrote well over 700 years before, 'the Lord has laid on Him' – has laid on the Son He loved so very much – 'the iniquity of us all'.²⁶

With these thoughts in our minds, let us sing again two of the verses we sang earlier ...

'Our God, whose justice did awake
The sword against *Thy Well-beloved*,
Thou didst *Thine own dear Son* forsake,
To mercy by His cries unmoved.

Yet was the Lord made flesh, and nailed
By men, His creatures, to the tree;
By all the powers of hell assailed,
And bruised and pieced, and slain *by Thee!*'

Endnotes

¹ Robert Clever Chapman (1803-1902).

² Gen. 22. 2.

³ Gen. 37. 3; linked no doubt to the fact that Joseph was Rachel's firstborn – and shared her good looks! For the very same expression is used to describe both Rachel and Joseph: 'Rachel was beautiful of form and appearance', Gen. 29. 17; 'and Joseph was beautiful of form and appearance', Gen. 39. 6 (both literal translations).

⁴ See 2 Sam. 13. 39; 14. 1; 18. 5, 29, 33; 19. 2, 4.

⁵ No individual angel has ever been addressed as He has been; 'to which of the angels did He (God) ever say: You are my Son', Heb. 1. 5.

⁶ 'Immediately He saw the heavens rent', Mark 1. 10 literally – being the same word as Mark uses of the veil of the Temple in chapter 15 verse 38.

⁷ Mark 1. 11; Luke 3. 22 – adding the description 'the beloved' to the words of Psalm 2. 7. 'In Matthew, as befitting the record of Christ's Kingship, His (God's) word is one of introduction and authentication ('This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased', Matt. 3. 17) ... In Mark and Luke, the Father says, 'Thou art my Son', addressing Him directly ... as the lowly Servant and as the lonely man', H. C. Hewlett (*The Glories of our Lord*, page 16). This was the first time that the heavens had found someone on earth worthy to open them. (Ezekiel 1. 1 refers to a vision – it was the revelation of God acting in judgement.)

⁸ Matt. 17. 5; Mark 9. 7; 2 Pet. 1. 17 (literally, 'This is my Son, my beloved').

⁹ See the references in notes 7 and 8 – and compare 2 Pet. 1. 17.

¹⁰ Although there too our Lord made clear His awareness of this special relationship. Note His unmistakable reference to Himself in the so-called 'Parable of the Vineyard'; 'Having yet therefore one son, his beloved, he sent him also last unto them, saying, They will reverence my son. But those husbandmen said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be ours', Mark 12. 6-7.

¹¹ The correct rendering; contrast the NIV's very poor paraphrase 'at the Father's side'. John assures us in chapter 1 of his gospel that He who was 'in the bosom', John 1. 18, could also be found 'in the beginning', John 1. 1, 'in the world', John 1. 10, and 'in the law', John 1. 45.

¹² And it is, John says, the One who knows all that is 'in the bosom of the Father' who tells Him out – who 'interprets', 'expounds' Him, as the word means. 'Only one who fully knows the Father can make Him fully known', F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, page 45. John's point is that our Lord Jesus alone is qualified and competent to reveal God – not even Moses (compare Exod. 33. 20 with John 1. 17-18). His knowledge of God – unlike that of any angel or prophet – is both thorough and absolute.

¹³ Compare Paul's statement; 'the love of God is shed abroad ('has been poured out') in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us', Rom. 5. 5 – the Holy Spirit communicating to us the awareness and assurance of God's love as demonstrated at the cross of our Lord Jesus.

¹⁴ Or perhaps shelter yourself there as a citadel and well-defended sanctuary.

¹⁵ Compare, 'All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him', Matt. 11. 27.

¹⁶ Compare, 'the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God', 1 Cor. 2. 10-11.

¹⁷ All others die on their own account – to settle their own debt, incurred for them by their own sins. But He had no debt of His own to pay!

¹⁸ Today's English Version paraphrases it, 'He walked the path of obedience *all the way* to death'.

¹⁹ Which I take to mean that His love for us is exactly like His Father's love for Him.

²⁰ See John 17. 20.

²¹ Truly, we are embraced (taken into favour) 'in the Beloved', Eph. 1. 6 – swept into 'the kingdom of the Son of His love', Col. 1. 13.

²² B. Thomas, *The Pulpit Commentary: The Gospel of John*, volume 2, page 373.

²³ John 17. 26.

²⁴ Based in part on Bruce Milne's comments on John 17. 24; 'So Jesus, in these final moments, as the last grains of sand trickle through the hour glass before His rendezvous with death, gazes across the rolling aeons of the future and anticipates the embrace of His beloved bride in the glory that is to be', *The Message of John*, The Bible Speaks Today series, page 251.

²⁵ Rom. 8. 32; cf. Isa. 53. 10 (when He who has *no pleasure* in the death of the wicked, Ezek. 33. 11, *was pleased* to bruise His righteous Servant); 2 Cor. 5. 21.

²⁶ Isa. 53. 6.