

**SERMON: Walking in the Love of Jesus - Jeremiah 15.15-21; Romans 12.9-21; Matthew 16.21-28**

Dear Father, we thank you for the sacrifice of Jesus' life for our sake. May we be show our gratitude by forfeiting our own life for His sake. Amen

Have you ever been chastised by someone you love deeply? No doubt it really hurt at the time. Yet, after the sting subsides, we can often learn a lot from rebukes like that. Parents of course find themselves having to do this as their children grow up, particularly in the rebellious teenage years. But it happens to us as adults too. Sometimes the people closest to us need to help us to grow.

In our Gospel reading, I can't imagine the pain Peter felt when Jesus compared him to Satan! It was only a short time earlier that Jesus had praised Peter for recognising him as the Son of God and pronounced that he would lead the early church. Yet here he is being rebuked in the sharpest way possible. Like a parent guiding their children, Jesus needed to teach Peter and the other disciples a hard lesson. The time of his crucifixion was drawing closer and he needed them to know what following Him really meant. In verses 24 and 25 *Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'* This is a well-known passage. Let's explore our Old and New Testament readings to see what light they can shed on its meaning.

**Jeremiah 15.15-21**

Jeremiah was around 15 years old in 627BC when he had a spiritual experience which convinced him he was called to be a prophet of Yahweh, but the message he proclaimed was the exact opposite of what the people wanted to hear. They wanted to know that God was leading Israel to great victory over its enemies. Jeremiah told them that they were far from God's favour. They needed to prepare for and submit to an invasion from the North. Needless to say this was rejected and it was not until **18 years later**, that the political situation dramatically changed and his interpretation of Judah's situation was listened to.

Yet even then, when Jeremiah prophesied in 609BC that unless Judah turned back to God, the Temple itself would be destroyed, an angry mob rioted and tried to kill him. Still he persisted with this message and 4 years later he was flogged and spent a night in the stocks. Jeremiah was the subject of ridicule and persecution for many, many years.

Little wonder then that he wrote his lament in today's Chapter 15 reading. Under the strain of the great cross he is bearing, in verse 18 he pleads with God: <sup>18</sup> *Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.*

Yahweh's answer is immediate and clear. In verses 19 to 21 Jeremiah is told, if he remains faithful to his calling; if he continues to lose his life for God's sake, regardless of the personal cost, then he will prevail in the face of all opposition.

What does this message mean for us? What does losing our life for Jesus' sake look like? Paul, in our Romans reading, gives us insight into answering this question in our own lives today. Week after week we speak about God's love because it is the absolute core of the Gospel message. Paul lived this truth to the best of his ability and encouraged the early followers to do so as well. As N. T. Wright explains, for Paul there is: *"a new way of being human, a way that is rooted, through baptism, in the Messiah, or more particularly in the love of the one God revealed in him. If anyone is in Christ- (they are) a new creation! Not 'Cogito, ergo sum (Descartes, I think therefore I am) BUT 'Amor, ego sum': I am loved, therefore I am."* In Romans 12 verses 9 to 21 Paul paints a clear picture of the challenges we face as we strive to lose our life by walking in this selfless, agape love of Jesus.

### **Romans 12.9-21**

Verse 9 opens with: <sup>9</sup> *Let love be genuine;...* The Greek word for "genuine" describes sincere behaviour free from hidden agendas or selfish motives. Literally, it means to be "without *hypocrisy*" or unfeigned. This is the love Christians strive to share with all we meet. We're not perfect of course. We often do not reach this standard but we are called to consciously attempt to do so. The rest of the passages up to verse 21 give us examples of how to make this attempt.

Theologian Anders Nygren draws a distinct parallel between the description of love in these verses and in Paul's counterpart teaching on love in 1 Corinthians 13. He makes this clear by paraphrasing the verses, using "love" as the subject. As I read out each verse, I invite us to reflect on what it means for our own walk in the love of Jesus. Please do share your thoughts as we go along.

*Verse 9b: "Love hates what is evil, but holds fast to what is good.*

- to convey the intense meaning behind the Greek it would be better translated as “absolutely abhor what is evil, bind yourself inseparably to what is good”. How does that translate into action?

*Verse 10: It loves the church family, and seeks to outdo them in showing honour.*

- This is the devoted love, shown by family-members who deeply honour one another. Think of the closest, most loving and honouring relationship you have within your own family. It is that kind of special affection that is to be shared between members of God's family; people divinely adopted as sons and daughters to the same Heavenly Father; as brothers and sisters of Jesus.

*Verse 11: Love never flags in zeal; it is aglow in the spirit; it serves the Lord.*

- God does not want us to be lukewarm, he wants our wholehearted commitment. To love, requires our dedicated passion.

*Verse 12: It rejoices in hope, is patient in tribulation, is constant in prayer.*

- To rejoice in hope is to celebrate the sure expectation of **what is certain**. Our salvation through God’s merciful and gracious love is that certainty: that is our eternal hope.
- We’re reminded that we will face suffering. There is not one of us who will not have to bear that cross and so Paul encourages us to patiently accept that reality. And then he immediately shows us how to gain that patience; he tells us to persevere in prayer. No matter what our suffering may be, if we can keep on turning to our Father in our hour of need we will gain support. We are not alone – we can reach out to our loving heavenly Dad and to our caring church brothers and sisters.

*Verse 13: It contributes to the needs of the saints and practices hospitality.*

- William Barclay puts it well: “Christianity is the religion of the open hand, the open heart, and the open door.”

*Verse 14: Love blesses those who persecute it; it blesses and does not curse.*

- Christ and his martyrs give us strong examples of blessing those who persecute us. Have we had to do this in our lives?

*Verse 15: Love rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep.*

- The people with whom we have the closest connection are the ones we rejoice and weep with deeply. Who are they? How did we build those relationships?

*Verse 16: Love lives in harmony with the our church family. It is not haughty, but associates with the lowly, it is never conceited.*

- How do we maintain harmony within the body of Christ?

*Verse 17a: Loves does not repay evil for evil.*

- This is similar to blessing those who persecute us.
- The lesson from Jesus: “Father, **forgive them** for they know not what they do.”

*Verse 17b: It takes thought for what is noble in the sight of all.*

- Are we open and transparent in the way we live our lives?

*Verse 18: If possible, so far as it depends on you, love lives peaceably with all.*

- What do the two conditions for living peaceably mean? How should Christians react to wars?

*Verses 19 and 20: Love never avenges itself, but loves even an enemy, according to the Scriptures which say ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink’.*

- “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord”
- When we love an enemy it is “Like heaping hot coals on them.” Love helps the unjust see the shameful errors of their ways.

*Verse 21: Love is not overcome by evil, but overcomes evil with good.”*

- The power of love is greater than all evil.
- How do we overcome evil with good in our lives?

Paul provides us much food for thought. Walking in the love of Jesus is not a simple, easy task. But it is profoundly rewarding as we take one step at a time closer to Him.

My concluding prayer is that we may be given the strength and courage to continue this loving walk. May we reap the eternal reward of losing our life for Jesus’ sake. Amen