

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The sermon for this 4th Sunday of Easter is based on the text from 1 John 3:16-24

¹⁶ *By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.* ¹⁷ *But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?* ¹⁸ *Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.* ¹⁹ *By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;* ²⁰ *for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.* ²¹ *Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;* ²² *and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.* ²³ *And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.* ²⁴ *Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us. (1 John 3:16-24)*

Let us pray: Father, you see us all through the eyes of Jesus Christ and accept us for his sake. You hear us and know that we need your forgiveness and mercy. Help us also to hear and understand your word for us. Teach us your way, O Lord, so that our words and actions may reflect you love and mercy. In Jesus' name, Amen

The outbreak of war brings chaos to those living in the conflict areas. As machine guns go off stunned citizens run for their lives wherever shelter may be found. Crouched down under a table or covered up with a plank one's heartbeat goes way over the top and the first thing that comes to mind is, obviously, the realization of how life threatening that is. As the crossfire escalates and the full scale of the battle is appreciated the impinging thought is: Will our army be able to save us from this turmoil?

In the same manner, when a person is seriously injured in an accident or afflicted by a severe illness all one can think is how chaotic his or her life suddenly became and whether the paramedics will be able to save them from the worst.

It is hard, in conditions of life or death, to trust that those in charge of our safety and well being have a contingency plan to deal with the situation effectively. Our first instinct is that of survival. It's the essence of our fallen nature to REACT to life threats as opposed to ACT in accordance to a preconceived evacuation plan, for instance.

REACTING may not be the wisest thing to do under a gunpoint nor if someone is trying to rescue you from a car accident. But we react to things more often than we think. We react to the credit crunch by spending less and saving more. We react to high blood pressure by taking medicines. And we react with sadness when the Holy Spirit creates in us a contrite heart because we did something we shouldn't have or didn't do something we should have.

In fear our faith faints. We lose the confidence that God will come to our rescue and feel like we should react somehow to the situation.

At this point it is difficult to believe that God even has a plan. We know there are rules (or commandments) we should follow but, contrary to all we may have learned, they are anything but good, life-giving or liberating. This is the sort of feeling that raises notions like: being a Christian is to walk our ways as if we had a halter on our heads while God holds the reins. The halter blinds us to the world around as we concentrate on our walk.

God's plan can be many things but blinding or restraining. It is good because it shows us the way we should go but can't and that we have Jesus who went all the way to give us a new life. It is life-giving because it shows us how to live our new life in Christ. A liberating life which we live in the knowledge that we are at peace with God.

God's plan wasn't an emergency plan. He didn't come up with it at the last minute in reaction to humanity's fall into sin. God knew even before creating us that we would make bad use of our free will and planned for our rescue beforehand. Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, gave us back the life that, otherwise, would be lost forever.

The driving force behind it was God's unique love for his creation. God's love is practical, not platonic. He gave us His Word to strengthen and comfort us but he also comes close to us as and takes care of us as Christ did. God continues to sustain us with his love unto life everlasting. This is the same sort of love he commands us to have for one another.

By this we know what love is. Without the knowledge that Christ laid down his life for us we have no idea what love means. Even before we were taught to call him Our Father, God called us his little children. God foresaw the extent of our sin and yet Christ's sacrifice was unconditional. Just as unconditional as the love he commands us to have for one another. A love that, indeed, shares God's love in word and speech as we proclaim the Good News of our Lord. But it goes all the way as Jesus went. It bears witness to our faith as we forgive, care for and support one another.

We don't need to reinvent the wheel. By faithfully carrying out our vocations we are doing things that are pleasing to God. And by doing these things, John says, we are keeping God's commandments and whoever keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in them.

Now you may ask: Does this mean that if we don't do these things we aren't saved? Even after all the talk about being saved by grace through faith in Christ?

And the answer, obviously, is no. We are saved because of what God did and does and not because of what we do. The saving faith we have in Christ comes through the Holy Spirit. The visible expressions of this faith are the good works the Holy Spirit enables us to do for others.

God's commandments were never meant to be enslaving in the sense of being our way to salvation but freeing and life-giving. This is precisely what John teaches us in his first epistle. God's love comes to us regardless of our deserving it. And it's such that we have plenty to share. As we share God's love the Holy Spirit reminds us that God took care of our greatest problem and that we are now free to care less about our status before God and more about others. Love in action kindles faith and faith reassures us of Our Father's love and forgiveness in case we find ourselves in doubt because of our many wars against God.

In God's master plan there are two rules: Love God and love one another. However, our Lord doesn't present himself as a severe warlord but as Good Shepherd. In his flawless plan our Good Shepherd guarantees the safety and well being of his flock. With the rod of all our tribulations, wars, illnesses, you name it, he reminds us of our frailty and how dependant we are of our saviour. In distress, he restores our souls to call upon him. With his staff he pulls us back to him and reminds us of his love for us. Then he leads us through paths of righteousness with one another as He enables us to share His love. This he does for his name sake, because he promised, by his own name, to do so.

Amen.

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

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