

Collect

Risen Christ, by the lakeside you renewed your call to your disciples:
help your Church to obey your command and draw the nations to the fire of your love,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen

Acts 17.22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

²⁹Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

Psalms 66. 7-18

Bless our God, O you peoples; •
make the voice of his praise to be heard,
⁸ Who holds our souls in life •
and suffers not our feet to slip.
⁹ For you, O God, have proved us; •
you have tried us as silver is tried.
¹⁰ You brought us into the snare; •
you laid heavy burdens upon our backs.
¹¹ You let enemies ride over our heads;
we went through fire and water; •
but you brought us out into a place of liberty.
¹² I will come into your house with burnt offerings and will pay you my vows, •
which my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
¹³ I will offer you fat burnt sacrifices with the smoke of rams; •
I will sacrifice oxen and goats.
¹⁴ Come and listen, all you who fear God, •
and I will tell you what he has done for my soul.
¹⁵ I called out to him with my mouth •
and his praise was on my tongue.
¹⁶ If I had nursed evil in my heart, •
the Lord would not have heard me,
¹⁷ But in truth God has heard me; •
he has heeded the voice of my prayer.
¹⁸ Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer, •
nor withheld his loving mercy from me.

1 Peter 3.13-22

13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. ¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

John 14.15-21

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

Address

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

Today seems to be about love. The Gospel reading is all about love – how we love Jesus, how he loves his Father, and how God loves us. We'll come back to that.

But it's not just that; today is 17 May, Norway's national Day (and can I say how sensible that is. In Latvia our National Day is 18 November; no scope for street parties and processions, no picnics in the park). But, of course, this year's celebrations will be so very different to the joy and exuberance of other years. Nevertheless, I'm sure that at several points of the day the national anthem will be sung and played – and, of course, the Norwegian anthem begins with love. One English translation I found started in verse 1 like this:

Yes, we love with fond devotion
This our land that looms
Rugged, storm-scarred o'er the ocean
With her thousand homes.
Love her, in our love recalling
Those who gave us birth.
And old tales which night, in falling,
Brings as dreams to earth.

We love all kinds of things. Love for our country is an honourable emotion, when it doesn't become corrupted by hate for those who are different, who are not from our land, who are of a different country. Love for our families, our friends, our pets, is natural, and beautiful. Love between spouses – whether new couples head over heels in love, or those who are growing old together, with a bond that has been forged and tested by time – is also admirable. It is true to say that love in its various forms is the cement that holds societies and communities together.

Just try to imagine, for a moment, how the world would look without love. A world where all was transactional, where altruism and care for others would really not exist; it would be utterly horrible.

What our Gospel reading teaches us today is that such a world is impossible. God created the world, and all its creatures; and God, at the very heart of God's Being, is love. The whole creative impulse that God draws us into flows out of an immense reservoir of grace and mercy, never emptying, never running dry. It is not just that God gives us a commandment to love, but that God loves us into keeping the commandments. It is not just that Jesus teaches us how to love, but that his very essence is love.

A little earlier in John's Gospel than today's reading, in chapter 13, Jesus says to his disciples on that far Maundy Thursday: ³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." We will be known as Jesus disciples, not by our liturgical practices, or our strict doctrines, or our canon laws, but by being seen to love one another. This is not necessarily easy. But this is not a sort of love that we feel for our spouses or our friends, which is largely a matter of feelings, of emotions; this is what is called agape (ἀγάπη in Greek) love. And this is more a question of attitude, of benevolence, of kindness, even to those of our brothers and sisters whom we might not necessarily like very much. Jesus' new commandment, after all, is not "A new commandment I give to you, that you like one another: just as I have liked you, you also are to like one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have liking for one another." No; we are called to do something harder, more demanding of us, but in the end infinitely rewarding. " ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them", says Jesus in our Gospel today. By our agape love for each other, we are drawn into this loving relationship that exists in God, a love that is shining, and infinite, and glorious.

Let us end with a verse from a hymn by Luke Connaughton:

Love is his law, love is his word:
love of the Lord, Father and Word,
love of the Spirit, God ever one,
love, only love, is his word:
Richer than gold is the love of my Lord,
better than splendour and wealth.

May your day of celebration be blessed!
Amen.

PRAYERS

We pray to Jesus who is present with us to eternity.
Jesus, light of the world,
bring the light and peace of your gospel to the nations.
Especially today we pray for the people of Norway,
celebrating Constitution Day,
and for all nations suffering from war, conflict and disease.
Jesus, Lord of life, **in your mercy, hear us.**

Jesus, bread of life,
give food to the hungry,
especially those threatened by the far-reaching effects of the pandemic
and nourish us all with your word.
Jesus, Lord of life, **in your mercy, hear us.**

Jesus, our way, our truth, our life,
be with us and all who follow you in the way,
especially Anglican communities in Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Stavanger,
and churches looking at ways of reopening safely.

Deepen our appreciation of your truth
and fill us with your life.

Jesus, Lord of life, **in your mercy, hear us.**

Jesus, Good Shepherd who gave your life for the sheep,
recover the straggler,
bind up the injured,
strengthen the sick
and lead the healthy and strong to new pastures.

Jesus, Lord of life, **in your mercy, hear us.**

Jesus, the resurrection and the life,
we give you thanks for all who have lived and believed in you,
especially those we have known and loved.

Raise us with them to eternal life.

Jesus, Lord of life,

in your mercy, hear us,

accept our prayers, and be with us always.

Amen.