

PENWORTHAM UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Order of Communion Service for Sunday 3rd May 2015

Reading: 1 John 4:7–21; John 15:1–8

Sermon

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and love is perfected in us.

Earlier this month I was forwarded an email asking for a response to a sixth form student's project exploring: 'Is it logical to be an atheist?'

He asked two questions:

1. Which three arguments for being a believer in God do you find most persuasive?
- and 2. What is your attitude towards atheists? Should they be tolerated or are their beliefs harmful?

I could not answer his first question without first questioning his premise. I do not believe that you can argue someone into faith, that you can set out a logical argument, present it, and then a non-believer will suddenly become a person of faith. So here is my reply:

I don't believe you can persuade someone to be aware of God.

There are many arguments, theories, and ideas, but for me they are secondary.

Faith in God (which I take as meaning trust in God) is an emotional or spiritual thing, not a logical or mental thing.

Faith is a fragile gift that some have always had, that takes others by surprise, that can break, that can disappear, and can reform and return.

It is a feeling in my gut that there is more to life than I can see, hear, taste, feel or smell. To that great unknown I give the name God.

Having said that, to answer your question:

- a. Pascal's wager; b. Ontological; c. Cosmological

Now for these three titles of arguments I did resort to google. I can keep arguments and ideas in my head, but I can never remember the long-words that are ascribed to them. So to explain them:

- a. Pascal's wager – if it's impossible to decide for sure one way or another, where are you going to place your bet. Not a very worthy answer, but an honest one.

- b. Ontological – this was proposed first by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). It is not possible to think of any being greater than God (as God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived"). Therefore God must exist in reality.

- c. Cosmological – proposed by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Everything has to come from something. You cannot make something out of nothing. Therefore there must have been a 'First Cause' that created the 'something' (the universe). That First Cause is God.

Then on to his second question: 2. What is your attitude towards atheists? Should they be tolerated or are their beliefs harmful?

I think there is a need for open conversations. I feel the majority of atheists claim the name because they reject the Church and an image of God as an old man with a beard intervening randomly, and as I have sympathy with that view we have more in common than they'd think.

It's only really when you get to the Dawkins of the world that you come across a fundamentalist atheism that is as unhelpful as any fundamentalist religion. They have a right to be heard, as long as they accept that others also have an equal right to be heard.

Both of these responses are reflected in the verse from the first letter of John that jumped out at me from today's readings:

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and love is perfected in us.

We cannot point at God.

We can't give someone a map to find God.

There isn't a list of instructions that makes God appear.

There are no completely accurate descriptions, pictures, or even words that can fully express God.

No one has ever seen God.

Of course there are ways that can help us. We have the Bible, the stories of Jesus and the example of Christ, years of Christian tradition, literature and experience, our own feelings and insights, and those of our fellow followers of Christ's way.

All of these can help, can at times draw us closer to God, but they are never 100% successful all of the time. The life of faith is one of perseverance, not of quick fixes or magic wands.

That path of perseverance, the way of Christ, is one of love. We take steps of faith, trusting that God is with us, within us, and before us, and we journey onwards in love. If we love one another, God lives in us, and love is perfected in us.

Now, before you bulk buy heart-shaped boxes of chocolate, that is but one way in which love is expressed.

I love my son Mark, but if he is climbing on the sofa, running towards the road, or doing something else that places him in danger, my immediate reaction is not to tell him he is loved and give him a treat. He'll get yelled at, grabbed and moved away, and his immediate reaction will be to cry.

He can't tell the difference between worry and anger, but it is because I love him that I want him to be safe, and at times for him to be safe means he'll be upset.

I am fully aware that this is but the first step on the road of love for a child, and is probably the most straightforward.

If we love one another, God lives in us, and love is perfected in us.

Love, especially when we use it as a description of God, encompasses the full extent, and more, of what the word means.

Following Christ's way, loving others as we love ourselves, is a path towards the life of God blossoming within us on the road to perfection.

Now if that was as easy as giving away chocolates and heart-warming sentimentality, then each of our lives, the life of this congregation, community, nation and world, would be dramatically different. We would no longer need to pray for God's kingdom to come, it would already be fully present.

Love can be heart-warming and chocolate fuelled, but it is also characterised by selflessness, patience, kindness, being trusting, modesty, humility, politeness, moderation, contentment, warmth, being forgiving, and truthfulness.

Love is tolerant, accepts things at face value whilst hoping for the good, and is steadfast.

Love involves hard choices, commitment, giving of ourselves and our time, and is a journey that can last a lifetime and more.

The way of Christ, is one of love. We take steps of faith, trusting that God is with us, within us, and before us, and we journey onwards in love.

If we love one another, God lives in us, and love is perfected in us. **Amen**