

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*  
**SUNDAY SERMON**

*Lent 1C - I am, you are, we are...Beloved*

*Delivered by Rev'd Dr Jo Inkpin on the 10th March 2019*

If you have ever been to St Luke's church in Toowoomba, you will know it has wonderful stained glass windows. These include, above the high altar, a replica of the famous medieval 'Blue Virgin' window from Chartres cathedral. Another outstanding feature, at the west end, above the baptistery, is a beautiful modern Australian stained glass window; which, almost like an Aboriginal dot painting, plots and celebrates so many aspects of Creation. There are several other windows too which command attention, including one with St Peter and girls from The Glennie School; a rendering of the meeting of Mary Magdalene with Jesus at the Resurrection; and a moving portrait (in the Warriors Chapel) of a dying soldier reaching out and touching the crucified Christ. All speak powerfully of Christian faith, and are, as it were, the Gospel in glass.. Over the years I ministered there however, the window I was surprisingly increasingly drawn to was one of those which are easily passed over: namely a stained glass window representing the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. As time went on, I would indeed particularly point this out to those who came for baptisms. For the message of that window goes to the heart of the good news - the Gospel - we all need to hear today: the good news which lies behind Jesus' responses to the great human temptations in our Gospel reading today. To flourish beyond such temptations, we, like Jesus at his baptism, need to hear, for ourselves, the words of God 'You are my Beloved, in you I am well pleased'...

'You are Beloved, in you I am well pleased': significantly this declaration comes immediately before the story of Jesus' temptations in the Gospels. Luke, it is true, inserts a short genealogy of Jesus between them, but the importance of the connection is the same. The Gospel writers are trying to tell us that what was vital about Jesus was that they were Beloved by God. Knowing that they were beloved, and well pleasing to God, anything which the world and the devil could throw at them was therefore useless. Since Jesus was, and, vitally, knew they were Beloved, no temptation or power of evil could ultimately destroy them. Love would always triumph in and through them. Can we say the same for us?

I don't know about you, but I'm constantly hearing the siren voices of temptations: telling me to do things, be things, have things. Those voices are all around us in our culture, aren't they? They are hard not to hear and take to heart. How well though do we hear the much more important words which God speaks to us, that 'You are my Beloved, in you I am well pleased.' For those words are meant for us as well as Jesus, and they help us overcome the temptations to be less than God knows us to be. Lent is a great invitation to take them to heart.

So, at the risk of never being allowed back in this church again, I want to ask us all to try something. It will probably be particularly uncomfortable for English people like myself - so my particular apologies to them/us. However, together, we are all also Australians here, aren't we? Australians can manage this I'm sure. For what I'd like you to do is to turn to someone and look at each other. Can we manage that? Now, as you look at each other, I want you to say together 'You are Beloved: in you God is well pleased.'...

How was that? Not too painful, I hope. Actually I hope it is life-giving to do that: for us to remind each other of what all of us are – beloved and well pleasing to God. For the siren voices of our world so often say something else, don't they? They tell us, like the devil, that we need to do, to be, or to have things to have any value. It is like that wonderful little book 'Mister God, This is Anna', where a little girl helps others see things properly, spiritually speaking. 'The difference between an angel and humans', she says at one point, 'is easy. Angels are not full of holes.' Think about it: as human beings we are full of holes marked by our needs – for comfort, attention, power, success, and so on. This is what the devil tempts Jesus with. Yet holiness is not the same as being full of holes. Jesus shows us that when we can grow in holiness when we refuse to be dominated by the demands of filling such holes in us. Sadly, the Church doesn't always help. For we can become so carried away with thinking about sin that we miss the crucial, core, point that, above all, we are beloved. Yes, we and our world are full of sin; that is, we fall short of God's love in various ways. It needs recognising. The deepest reality however is that we are beloved. Accepting that, and living differently as a result, is the real heart of Christian life.

The great 20th century priest and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen put it helpfully, reflecting on Jesus' temptations. We are tempted, he said, to believe that what we are depends on what we do, or what others say about us, or what we have. That is what the devil in the story tempted Jesus with. Yet this is foolishness. What we do, or what people say about us, or what we have, is subject to change, and all of that will in the end pass away. Yet God knew us as beloved before we were born, still regards us as beloved, and will always seek to embrace us as beloved, into eternity. If we therefore follow Jesus in knowing this, we will always be able to find peace, whatever happens to us – good or bad. For, as Henri Nouwen wrote, in his book 'Life of the Beloved':

Over the years, he said, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, "Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody." ... [My dark side says,] I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved."...

The core of our faith, said Henri Nouwen, is the conviction that you and I are God's beloved daughters and sons. One of the enormous spiritual tasks we have is to live a life based on that knowledge. Shall we do that? How about we start again right now. We've told each other that we are all Beloved. That's not always easy, is it?! How about we tell ourselves? That is even harder I think, especially for some of us when we look into a mirror. Let's try it though, beginning right now. Let's all close our eyes for a moment, breathe softly and try to feel God's love around us.... Now, let's all say together 'I am Beloved, in me God is well pleased.'... ..How was that? You can try it if you like at home, every day for the rest of Lent – and if you're really brave try doing it in front of a mirror. For that is the reality of God's love for us and the loving strength of Jesus which enabled him to triumph over all temptations to self-rejection, settling only for success, popularity or possessions.

What kind of windows – stained or otherwise – are we? How do we display of God's love? My sense is that too often we, as church together, keep forgetting those words of God at Jesus' baptism and therefore succumb to Jesus' temptations. Not only do we often not really believe we are beloved by God, but we even sometimes give others the impression that they are not really loved by God. Far too many people in our society therefore feel worthless and too many of them also feel worthless because the Church gives them the impression that that they are not fully loved by God, especially if some aspect

of their humanity - their sexuality, or gender, or race or background, or differing abilities - is not valued by us. Sometimes they may even feel condemned. Let's face it, some of us can feel like that in some churches too, can't we? Thanks be, God's love is bigger!

Above all, the Church today is therefore called to reclaim the truth of being beloved by God. Until we do that, nothing will really help - including the most creative and determined evangelistic schemes which can be found. So let me ask of you one more thing. Do you know that song 'I am Australian' and how it ends" 'I am, you are, we are Australian?' ' Shall we say something similar, only even better? Can we say together - and share that with others - 'I am, You are, We are Beloved'? Let's try it...

In the name of Jesus who knew themselves, and all of us, as truly Beloved, Amen.