

Sermon 1st After Christmas 30.12.12
Colossians 3:12-17

Col 3 12-17 Christmas 1 Ser
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Among the great themes of Christmas are:

- Love
- Peace
- Thankfulness

All these are concentrated in just two verses in Colossians:

Over all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together perfectly. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, the peace to which you were called in one Body; and be thankful. 3:14-15

At Christmas, in the birth of the infant Christ, we celebrate the truth that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” (Jn 3:16) The birth of Christ is, above all, a personal expression of God’s love; God’s love in the person of his Son or Word, come to dwell with us. Paul writes “Over all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together perfectly.”

Kirsty Young, on Radio 4’s Desert Island Disks, asked her guest, Sister Wendy Beckett, whether she felt deprived or lonely living the life of a hermit? Sister Wendy’s response was:

No. I feel privileged, because I have so much time to be with God and let him love me.

Nuns, monks, and priests live a celibate life devoted to serving and loving God. Their lives of prayer, worship, and service are so structured that loving God comes first. The majority of us do not live like this. We have responsibilities to family, friends,

and work colleagues as well as to church. Our lives are comprised of overlapping loyalties and loves. Paul recognised that the new Christians at Colossae were in the same situation. They had pledged their loyalty to God through Christ, but they still had many other loyalties to which they needed to attend. They and we can often feel that our loyalties and loves compete and conflict, pulling us in different directions. Just think about all the other things we could be doing if we were not here now at worship? We need something that can hold together and integrate our various loves and loyalties. For Paul, there is something that can achieve this: God’s love.

God’s love is a giving and generous love, so generous that all acts of human love are enabled by it. This is because we are created beings, and God is the Creator. All energy, including energy to love, ultimately comes from God. But love is the most important energy, for love, along with praise and prayer, is ultimately directed back to its source: to God. All our desires, all our wants and needs, our desire for security, friendship, happiness, and intimacy—whether we recognise them as such or not—are earthly expressions of our ultimate desire for God; this was one of St Augustine’s great insights.

God the Father mediates his love for us generally through Creation, and specifically through his Son and in his Spirit. At Christmas, we celebrate that specific expression of love in the infant Christ. It is the love that takes the risk of becoming incarnate. And this very specific expression of love has the power to bind and integrate all our other loves and loyalties because it has a specific character. Paul defines this love as compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient, and forgiving. And when you think about it, there is probably no better way of balancing the demands and needs of family, friends, and

colleagues than seeking to love with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness. Perhaps we should add to these, *strength*: the strength to say 'no' when demands are unreasonable.

Without this kind of love, our lives can become *centrifugal*. A centrifuge spins at high speed and forces things out from the centre to the extremity. Chemists and medical researchers use a centrifuge to separate and distinguish compounds: such as the elements in blood. From experience, we know how our loyalties can have a similar effect: the demands of family, friends, and work can spin us centrifugally so that we lose a sense of connection with our centre in God. I've also observed this in church life, where responding to increased demands results in people worshipping less and less, and some stop worshipping altogether. The worship of God ceases to be the centre of their life; something else has become central, or perhaps there is no fixed centre and life becomes a perpetual race round the periphery.

But Paul believes that such a process is not inevitable, and, indeed, that there is a countervailing force. Paul writes that love can "bind everything together perfectly." Paul writes about love as a *centripetal* force. A centripetal force is that by which bodies are drawn or impelled, or in any way tend, towards a point at a centre. A satellite in orbit around a planet or star is an example of the planet or star exerting a centripetal force: such as the Earth exerts on the Moon; and the Sun exerts on the Earth and other the planets of our solar system. When we come to understand that all our loves are derived from and sustained by God's loving energy, and come to understand that all our loves are penultimate expressions of our ultimate love for God, then this helps us to order and calibrate our loves. Indeed, an important question to ask of all

our loves and passions and duties is this: is this helping or hindering me from attending to God at the centre?

When we have harmonised and integrated our loves, we will more likely find *peace*. Part of the song that the host of angels sang to the shepherds was "Peace on earth to those on whom God's favour rests." (Lk 2:14) Paul writes: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." For the biblical writers, 'heart' is the seat of feelings, thoughts, and the will. If the peace that Christ brings is to affect us, it must begin by bringing God's shalom—peace, wholeness, well being—to bear upon our emotions, thoughts, and desires. No amount of 'head knowledge' about God's love will do us any good if, emotionally, we feel we are unloveable. I think that this aspect of God's love is best communicated by God's people who, despite attempts to push them away, keep coming back again and again to love those who feel rejected and unloveable. In the acceptance of such love, peace is found. But we also need to 'know' God's peace. Instead of lying awake at night worrying about things over which we have no control, we should turn them over to God, who is the Ruler of all. God's peace also needs to reach the will or desires. When our desires are unruly, going this way and that, we are no longer free but enslaved. Those who are addicted exhibit the destructive effect of desires that are not regulated. St Augustine vividly illustrates the effect of restless desire in his *Confessions*: from his theft of pears, to taking a concubine, to becoming a Manichee, to his addiction to gladiatorial contests. His earlier life manifested the restlessness of heart that he would later acknowledge as ceasing only when he rested in God.

Christmas is a time to be *thankful*, to count one's blessings. Paul writes: "Be thankful" Christmas is the season in which

people tend to take stock and give thanks for the many good things they enjoy. Thankfulness is the great antidote to the inflated sense of *entitlement* that too many people seem to exhibit. Contrary to popular opinion, the world does *not* owe us a living; the world is God's Creation. Each human person is a small but valued part of that great and risky enterprise that is God's Creation. That we have food to eat, a roof over our head, people who care about us, and are loved by God, should all be a matter of profound thankfulness. Yes, there are still many things that are not right, and others that are disturbingly wrong; but these are the very kind of things that were grist to the psalmist's mill as they both complained, and gave thanks, to God. The energy from God that we experience as love (*hesed*) is the same energy that enacts justice (*mishpat*), when we let it galvanise us into action. Christmas is a time of generosity and service, and for this we give thanks to God. Amen.