

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Ash Wednesday

Wednesday 14 February 2024

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by David Ford OBE, Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus,
University of Cambridge

With All your Heart

‘Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your heart...
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...’ - Joel 2:12, 13.

‘With all your heart’, says the prophet Joel. Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, and also Valentine’s Day. Both are about our heart’s desires.

It’s easy to play down Valentine’s Day, or see it as superficial, over-hyped, and an occasion for restaurants, and shops and websites selling Valentine cards and gifts, to do a lot of business. But many on Valentine’s Day do take a serious risk in a relationship, they make an approach that risks being rejected, or go on a date that can go well—or be a big disappointment. All the surveys and statistics show that, for most of us, our core desire is for good relationships, relationships in which we can trust and be trusted, love and be loved.

Valentine’s Day, if you see it as being about relationships, is typical of many things in our culture: fundamentally good things, like food, drink and clothes, health and medical drugs, knowledge and information, money, power and success..., things we can rightly desire, but every one of them can also go terribly wrong. There has probably never been a time in history when people were more saturated, flooded, overwhelmed, with stimuli to our desires, through so many media: click on this, vote for this, buy this, eat this, drink this, like this, watch this, read this, learn this, believe this, protest against this, visit this, imitate this, be like this, be afraid of this, follow this person, and so on. Life is full of desires that involve choices, decisions, hopes, fears, things we want and things we don’t want. So how do we shape our desires? What inspires our longings? Where do we find a wisdom of desire to navigate our way through all the stimuli, all the attractions and temptations? And can we help each other, so that we don’t have to cope alone?

This is where Lent comes in. *Lent is about learning a wisdom of life-shaping desire.* Jesus in the wilderness was tempted—in his case about food, about the wrong way to get power, and about the wrong way to achieve success. His wisdom of desire was basically simple: he had to be true to who he really was, to his core identity as Son of God—God who, as Joel said, is abounding in steadfast, reliable love. Just before his temptations, at his baptism, Jesus had heard the voice of God his Father saying, ‘You are my son, with whom I am well pleased’ - or, as one lovely translation puts it, ‘my

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beloved Son in whom my heart delights'. He is utterly loved by God, desired by God, and he loves his Father utterly in return. He knows where his true identity is centred: in God, in love. Lent is a time when we can centre our lives afresh on God, on love; on the two great commandments that sum up what God desires for us: to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. That is the greatest adventure we can ever have. It is the 'date' that is really worth the risk, the leap of faith.

Our reading from the Gospel of John this evening is about desire and love gone wrong: a woman caught in adultery. It is a fascinating story in many ways, opening up all sorts of questions, but one thing is very clear: *Jesus gives the woman a completely fresh start*. That is what he does for us too, as our desires, actions, and habits go wrong again and again. Lent is a time for our fresh start, a time to learn better how we are created by God for good desires, in relation to God, in relation to each other, and in relation to the whole of God's creation. Lent is a time to be inspired afresh by the best possible desires, to develop better habits of prayer and worship, learning a wisdom of desire and loving action, and doing that learning both alone and together.

The rest of John's Gospel offers the best imaginable education in desire. The very first words of Jesus to his very first disciples set the headline. He says to them: 'What are you looking for?' (1:38) What are you searching for? What do you desire? What is really, really worthwhile? Among all the stimuli, all the attractions and temptations, all the things you can set your heart on, where is real wisdom, where is true, deep love?

I spent over twenty years writing a commentary on the Gospel of John, trying to learn, live, and share that wisdom. It was the most amazing, challenging, and profound experience of my life. Now I am trying, with the help of others (some as far away as Tasmania) to distil that into a Lent book, called *Meeting God in John*, beginning with a five week course that some of you will be following in the coming five weeks in two groups, one online and one in person here in the cathedral. You will be the guinea pigs trying it out and seeing how it works, so that I can learn from your feedback before I finish the book.

The first week is on the big picture, the worldview of God and all reality that the Gospel of John gives us, a worldview that is now in the twenty-first century more relevant than ever—the deep meaning and deep love that we meet in Jesus as God's Word, God's self-expression and self-giving, all shared with us as we receive it in trust.

The second week is about desire: what are we searching for, what do we really want?

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The third week is about the fundamentals of our identity: Who is Jesus? Who are we? Who am I? Who is God?

The fourth week is about where we are most deeply rooted, where we are most fully at home, how our life is shaped long-term; in John's terms, where we abide. The extraordinary good news is that we can really be at home with God and each other and creation, embraced as members of God's family, loved and loving.

And the final week is about the most astonishing thing of all: the glory of God, and meeting God in John. In what for me is the most profound chapter in John's Gospel, John chapter 17, Jesus on the night before his crucifixion opens his heart in prayer to his Father, pouring out his deepest desire, and he can even say this: 'The glory you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, *I desire* that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.' (17:22-24) What a desire! What love! What glory! What a vision of utter unity, in love, with God, and with each other, for the sake of the whole world, and all creation! And then come the culminating words: '... so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them [that is, in us, his followers, those who trust him—at this point he is praying for his later followers, for us. He desires passionately (to the point of laying down his life) for his love for us not to be one-way but to be mutual, and *the only way love can be fully mutual is if there is mutual trust*, the sort of mutual love and trust that is seen in the final chapter of the Gospel. There the crucified and resurrected Jesus talks with Peter, who has let him down terribly; but he now gives Peter a completely fresh start: 'Do you love me?' 'Do you love me?' 'Do you love me?' says Jesus 'Yes!' 'Yes!' 'Yes!' says Peter (21:15-19). And he is given his vocation, as we all are. Our vocation is love—of God and each other. So this prayer culminates:] '... so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.' *Lent is a school for this love, a time to be formed and inspired by the only desire that is ultimately fulfilling.*

Whether you do the course or not, that is what Lent can be for you, a fresh start and inspiring encouragement to love God and love each other. I will be back here speaking with you during Holy Week, on the evening of Maundy Thursday and during the Good Friday service. Meanwhile I will be praying that you all have a very good Lent.

Amen.