

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 15 February 2015 – Last Sunday after Epiphany (Transfiguration)  
2 Kings 2.1-12; Psalm 50.1-6; 2 Cor. 4.3-6; Mark 9.2-9

You'll have seen it, I expect, on television: the heart-warming story of Katie Cutler, a twenty-one year-old beautician from Gateshead, who raised over £330,000 from all over the world to find a new home for a tiny, frail and vulnerable man after he had been knocked to the ground by a burglar outside his house and suffered a broken collar-bone. The attacker has since been identified and charged. We don't hear many stories like that on the news, but every now and again, amidst the reporting of human cruelty a simple act of human kindness reminds us of its power to make a difference and heal a hurt. When gunmen burst into a Jewish supermarket on the same day of the *Charlie Hebdo* murders in Paris, amidst all the horror one of the employees – a young Muslim man called Lassana Bathily – bravely led a number of shoppers who would otherwise have been slaughtered to a hiding-place in a store-room, from which in due course they emerged unharmed. His quiet and courageous action shines like a beacon of hope amid the atrocities committed by those who practise evil and claim so blasphemously that it is divinely sanctioned.

Do such actions like those of these two people tell us anything about what the love of God might be? They surely must. The compassion aroused by the plight of a person in need; the courage which risks one's own life to save others because shared humanity is valued above narrow allegiance to the tribe - these are virtues which are recognised, I am sure, in all the great religious traditions and we should honour them. Neither of them did what they did in order to win recognition for themselves, nor have they capitalised on it to seek a reward, other than that of knowing that they helped to preserve life in the face of the evil which would destroy it. They acted because an instinct for goodness and love welled up within them in ways which may have taken them by surprise, and what they did has spoken to the same instinct within many others. A young beautician and a young Muslim man have taught us all a lesson about

the human capacity for love. The evil which was done cannot be undone; but if you want to know what it means for the light to shine in the darkness and for the darkness not to be able to extinguish it, you need look no further.

One small word, love, has to do duty for a whole range of meaning, of which soppy Valentines and the romantic variety are only one tiny part. There's the love of friendship, so undervalued in our society, without which our lives would be so terribly impoverished. There's the love of parents for severely disabled children, which brings out of them a depth of caring and sacrifice which is humbling to observe. There's being in love and there's love for creatures great and small, for pets, for the world of nature. There's love of self, which is good when it does not exclude the love of others, and becomes selfish and destructive when it does. One small word; and I've only touched on a few of its senses.

Many of us grew up in the shadow of a late Victorian culture which was so suspicious of the flesh that you had to pummel it into submission and leave behind the beauties of this world in order to embrace the realm of the spirit. But in both Jewish and Christian traditions the human experience of love has been consistently used to imagine the nature of divine love. One biblical book stands out in this respect: the Song of Solomon. Where much of the Bible (but by no means all) is patriarchal and keeps women subservient, the lovers in the Song of Songs are equals. The groom delights in the bride and the bride delights in the groom. Each sings of the other's beauty and grace and both rejoice in their mutual love and friendship. It is a world away from the violence and the misogyny which mars some of the pages of Scripture, and for at least seventeen hundred years it was interpreted variously as the love-song between God and Israel, or Christ and the Church, or Christ and the soul.

You may think that this allegorising, spiritualizing approach to a beautiful poem about erotic love only underlines the suspicion in some religious traditions of anything to do with the flesh or sex. But it's more complex than that. For, as all the great mystics confess, our language about God can never be more than a feeble, imperfect attempt to say something about One who cannot be limited or captured by our words and ideas. And, as they equally maintain, the nearest kind of language we can borrow is the language of human love, poetic and symbolic rather than prosaic and factual, intense and passionate, rather than detached and analytical. The first words of the

Song in the King James version are 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine'. I mean, who could ask for more – kisses and wine? There they are on many of the Valentine cards people have been sending and receiving. What have they got to do with the life of the spirit? You might think it an odd if rather attractive religion in which kissing and drinking wine were the staple fare of worship. But think again: the kiss of peace is an ancient liturgical act, as a sign of our reconciliation in God, and wine is at the heart of our sacramental life, as a sign of communion with the crucified and risen Lord. Some of the ancient commentators interpreted this desire for the kiss of the Beloved as a longing for the Incarnation, when, as it were, God kissed human flesh and was joined with it in love: fanciful, perhaps; but beautiful and surprising in its emphasis on tenderness and intimacy, as opposed to dry doctrinal statements.

I reckon that the mystics and the old interpreters of the Song were on to something. The noblest expressions of human love share many of the features associated with divine love. They delight in the beauty and grace of the other for its own sake, not because they want to possess or control it for selfish ends. They have the power to forgive and to heal the hurtful things we all say or do from time to time. They long to protect, to nurture and to cherish: how often we see that when parents of severely disabled children speak of their love for them and make so many sacrifices for them. They put one's own comforts second, and will even risk one's own life for another person. These are all human qualities, among the finest we can ever hope to know; but they are also those which Jesus of Nazareth lived by and died for. He brought forgiveness and healing to people who had lost hope and purpose; he reached out to embrace those who were at the bottom of the pile. There is, he said, no greater love than the willingness to lay down one's life for one's friends; and these were no mere words, because that is exactly what he did. In all such cases, the light of divine love shines through our imperfect human attempts to practise his teaching.

You may have wondered why I have said nothing about the Transfiguration of Jesus, that mysterious moment on the hill-top (it wasn't really much of a mountain) when the disciples saw him conversing with Moses and Elijah and shining with an unearthly light. My excuse is that I preached about it last year and many times before. But actually I've been talking about it all the time. For to what else does it refer than to

those moments or those people which take us by surprise, in which the divine light shines through the ordinary to transform it into something wonderful? For centuries, alchemists tried to find the secret of turning base metal into gold, the fabled philosopher's stone. In his poem 'The Elixir', which we shall sing in a few moments, George Herbert takes this idea as his starting-point to show us that there is nothing so insignificant that it cannot become truly precious. The secret ingredient, what we need to add to the mix in order to make the transformation, is not, he insists, some mineral with magical properties but three little words, 'for thy sake'. Instead of resenting or taking for granted the things we have to do, they become an offering to God. And then, even drudgery – routine tasks, housework, the things we most dislike doing – can become divine. It is in that spirit that I end with the following story for St Valentine, in the hope that the disappointment it seems to embody might just turn to gold, and with apologies for not concluding in a serious and uplifting manner.

A smart and handsome young guy, dressed in the latest fashion, walked into his local pub. He noticed a woman gazing at him without blinking her big eyes. He felt flattered so he walked up to her and said in his deepest voice, 'I'll do anything you wish, beautiful lady, for just £10, but on one condition.' The woman appeared to be lost in the moment and asked as if in a trance, 'What's your condition?' He answered, 'Tell me your wish in just three words.' There was a long pause, the woman opened her purse, counted out the money and handed it to the man along with her address. She then looked deeply into his eyes and whispered, 'Clean my house.'

'Who sweeps a room as for thy sake | makes that and th'action fine'. I wonder....