

Jane Ward-Hall

## I Believe in Him

Psalm 121

John 3:1-17

I enjoy nothing better than a good romantic drama! On Valentine's Day Terry took me to see the new version of Jane Austen's Emma. What makes it especially enjoyable for me is noticing the way the film makers show how the couple fall in love. Emma has known Mr Knightley since she was born she grows up considering him an older brother, but it's only when they are dancing, looking at each other face to face that they realise they love each other. There is a lot of eye contact between lovers. Another of my favourites is Pride and Prejudice. Remember the scene where Elizabeth and Darcy gaze at each other over the piano at Pemberley?

Today's Psalm tells us that God is always looking at us. There are signs up outside our grandsons school that say " greet your child with a smile, not with your phone". The loving look mothers give their babies ( empathetic gaze) is a vital part of healthy development. I like to think that God looks at us this way. Full of love. Not spying on us to see the wrong we do.

Our gospel reading contains what many would call the most famous verse in the Bible. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him, shall not perish but have eternal life." It's the gospel in a nutshell! God sent Jesus because he loves us. God looks at us and loves us, as we are. God sent Jesus to live with us, walk this earth as a human being, so that we in turn can look at God. See what he is like and love Him in return.

The context of today's gospel reading is the first of several indepth conversations that Jesus has with individuals in John's gospel. Nicodemus, a Jewish leader has heard a lot about Jesus and is fascinated to meet Jesus for himself. To ask him questions, see if he thinks Jesus is kosher! To see if he might be able to believe in Him. Jesus is ok with this. I imagine Nicodemus might have got more than he bargained for.

I think Jesus seems to be saying that the old order is being overturned. God is starting a new family which can include everyone. This would have been a great shock to Nicodemus to whom pure race and Jewish heritage, being God's chosen people, mean everything! But this passage makes it clear, by repeating the phrase, that it is whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life. Belief in Jesus is the way in, the door. Nothing to do with who your parents were, what your job is, what your achievements are.

Jesus wants to do everything he can to help us believe. This may be why he mentions Moses in this conversation. Moses, one of the great Jewish forefathers - Nicodemus will know all about him. Jesus offers him a link, if he can but see it. Verse 14 "just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness so the son of man must be lifted up that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." This refers to an Old Testament story in Numbers

21 where God told Moses to hold up a bronze snake on a pole and everyone who looked at it would live.

"The Son of Man must be lifted up", even this early in Jesus' public ministry, Jesus is talking about the cross. "For God so loved the world" that "the Son of Man must be lifted up" on the cross.

This is the dilemma that so many people find so hard to reconcile. It can be a block to belief. If God is love why did His Son die in agony?

We thought a few weeks ago about the upside down nature of the kingdom of God and how the way we see things is not necessarily the way God sees things. If I am going to believe in Jesus then I have to face up to the fact that my idea of love, romantic fiction soft, gooey, fluffy, is not the whole picture. The nature of God's love for us is different from our normal expectations of love. One of the aspects of God's love that is similar to the films I watch, is "desire". The lovers desire each other. God desires you. Yet His desire is of a different quality because human desire, which lets face it, can be lustful, and will very often have a measure of self interest. We may want to reassure ourselves that the other person still wants us, finds us attractive. But God's love and desire for us will always be totally self giving, wanting the best for us, offering us freedom, even when we can't see it ourselves.

What is it that God wants from us? For us to grow in ever deeper relationship with him. To grow so that our deepest desire begins to match His deepest desire, for us to be in union with Him forever. This is eternal life.

He yearns for you! I remember, years ago, being quite shocked when I read "God is more interested in building our character than He is our comfort." But what's really shocking is that love and pain go together. They are part of the same package. I can testify to this from my own personal story. Plus if you have ever read or seen "Shadowlands" the account of CS Lewis marriage, he only realises he loves Joy when she is dying of cancer. Oh, how I long for pain free love! But that's just wishful thinking, not reality. Love and pain go together.

Life is a harsh teacher but if we can learn its lessons we are better for it. I can't say I'm grateful for the pain I went through in the early 2000's but I am very grateful for the life I have now.

The cross is a signpost in history that shows us what God's love for us is like. When we look at the cross what are we looking at? Cruelty and pain? Naked vulnerability? Evil being defeated? Yes but so much more. We are looking at the full dramatic display of God's love for us. A love beyond measure. A love that gives everything. The power of God's love for us on the cross says "I long for you, I will give everything to have you near me".

Faith is how we respond to a love like that. We look to Jesus, look at the cross and keep looking. Knowing that God is looking at us with love.