

[In place of Sunday Worship (26 April 2020) here are words on an aspect of *love*, in particular the “*sincere love for each other*” of 1Pt.1,22. May it please God to speak to us through his word and may He give us grace to ponder it carefully. Again, as it is offered so let it be received – prayerfully, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose grace and peace be with us all.]

2Pt.1,1-2:

To those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

– 1Pt.1, 17-23

Walking down the road and having to cross it in order to avoid passing another person too closely, waiting outside shops while at a virus-safe distance from others, making sure you do not infringe the 2-meter rule of social distancing – this is now behaviour that has become quite familiar to us. Some of the familiar ways of social interaction had to be abandoned.

We now all have to practice social-distancing. The socially familiar hand-shake, for instance, is now quite an alien concept and simply not done.

Of course, this is not for ever. It is a temporary measure, put in place in order to combat the spread of the virus in our society and in our communities. As such it is intended for our and everybody else's good.

The reason for mention it in this place is that it may illustrate – I hope it does that in some measure – the fact that faith in God works in a similar way. Though in the case of faith it is about something far more fundamental. Also, unlike social distancing faith is not a temporary measure but a lasting, ultimate and the socially properly decisive one. Social distancing seeks to tackle the troublesome interference of the virus in our society. And the plan is, of course, for things to return to normal asap. Faith, however, is put in place to tackle a far more fundamental as well as far more troublesome interference, one which requires not a return to what is considered 'normal' but healing at the root. Like social distancing, faith involves a process of making us become familiar with what used to be alien and become unfamiliar with what used to be familiar. Unlike social distancing, however, because it has to go so much deeper, faith is a one-way process.

The good intended by social-distancing is protection from the virus. That is commendable as far as it goes. But the ills at the root of life and society are thereby not helped. They are not reached by vaccines or any of the things we manufacture in our factories and laboratories, or the like. They need the good that is pursued by faith – **love**. Because of this connection between faith and love Peter homes in on it in this way: *“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.”* Here is the 'recipe' for healing.

When we see how carefully and diligently the measure of social distancing is observed, helped by a ready fear of becoming ill and losing one's life as well as by a constant stream of newsroom chatter, how much more ought we to see those who believe in God through Jesus Christ whom He raised from the dead, who are therefore no longer subject to the old fears and who have God's promises, seek carefully and diligently faith's fruit –which is love?

Indeed, we all need to hear Jesus' reordering of priorities: *“Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (Mt.6,33) There is a

truth to be prioritised, a truth which we can, and must, grasp with both our hands and all our heart: it is that our faith in Christ makes things new – makes us new. I say ‘with both our hands’ because only by recognising that we are what faith *makes* of us can and will we begin to do what faith *wants* of us – that we *“love one another deeply, from the heart.”*

The thrust of what Peter says aims to show you and me what faith in Christ, that is what Christ through faith in him, makes of us. And what faith does – and here is the parallel of sorts with what’s happening under social distancing – is to make what is familiar become alien and what is alien become familiar. We have to let it do that.

Peter puts it slightly differently. Faith, he says, makes us foreigners where we were at home, and makes us at home in the things that were foreign to us. Now do we not, if we have faith, have a lively sense of this, even as this process of change is not yet complete? We still sense, do we not, the old unfamiliarity with prayer to the Father, with the notion of God’s impartial judgment, with what it means to fear God, with love being the fulfilment of his law. These things are alien to the way the world thinks. Just imagine you mention to one the judgment of God or pray in a godly way in full view and in their hearing, or say that love does not sin and that sin cannot be love. But there is a sense in which these things feel alien to us still even now, even though they feel so less strongly. We have not become fully foreign to the things in which we used to be at home, *“the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors”* is still beckoning us to be at home in it.

Yet we are redeemed from this way. And we know that we are because we are more at home in the things that once were alien to us, as alien as they still are to the world: We have begun to fear God, with the result that our old fears are losing their grip over our hearts, we think of God more in terms of his own word and less in those of our own thoughts, we are less reluctant to call on God from the heart and we want to know how to pray, we see God’s law in a different way and use it to give us light, we ponder God’s work in our lives in judgement and grace, we have begun to see with eyes of love and to know that love is what we owe.

Dear friend, this change is a process still underway, a work in progress. The cause of this process, which is also its engine, is faith – faith in Jesus Christ, in the fact that he has died in order to redeem you from the realm in which you were at home, familiar with what is alien

to godliness and sincere love, to make you at home in what was foreign territory to you – prayer to your Father in heaven because Christ has reconciled you to Him, and a will out of sincere love for all who are His to love deeply, from the heart.

This faith let us nurture by seeking Christ in repentance and faith. So we become at home in the things of God, in His kingdom, even as we become foreign to the empty ways of sin and fear, through *the living and enduring word of God*. AMEN

“Lord, in your mercy help us to reorder our lives in the light of our redemption. Knowing you we become free from worrying too much about our worldly needs and about what life owes us and we begin to think instead of the love that we owe for your sake. You are the truth which sets us free. Keep us in it, we pray, as we give you thanks and praise. AMEN”

[take time to pray – recall God’s mercy, intercede for others, cast all your cares on God and commit your ways to Him, hold Him holy in your heart; the Lord’s Prayer]

Hebr.13,20-21:

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen
