

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year B)
Cathedral Church of St Peter, St Petersburg
11 March 2018

✠ **I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Three cradle Episcopalians on the preaching staff, and they give John 3:16 to the ex-Baptist . . .

As you no doubt know, the Revd Dr Billy Graham died recently. There was a pattern to his big revival gatherings, the same pattern I knew in the churches in which I grew up. There would be some prayers and songs, then a sermon (*much* longer than any Episcopalian would sit still for), and then, at the end, an altar call. For Dr Graham the message would always, in one form or another, be the message of John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoso believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” And if you were stirred by this message—the whole Gospel in a single powerful sentence—you would go down the aisle while the choir sang, and someone would pray with you, and you would—this was the terminology—you would get saved. For us, more often than not, the music was “Just as I am”:

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidd’st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.

I come because he bids me. I come because his blood was shed for me. I come, not to “get saved,” but because I have already been saved. Isn’t that what Paul drives home in our Epistle? Paul is so fired up by the message of salvation by grace through faith that he can’t wait until he gets to it properly and in order, so he just blurts it out in the middle of saying something else—“by grace you have been saved”—and then comes back to it more fully when the time is right: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

By grace you *have been saved*, already, by the gracious action of Jesus Christ, not by anything you have ever done or ever could do. We are what *he has made us*.

And we are also what he *is making* us. Not only have we been saved, we *are being* saved. How is your Lent going? This is the Fourth Sunday in Lent, and usually by this time my Lenten disciplines are as busted as New Year's resolutions are by the first of February. But this year I'm having a good Lent—not the result of works, so that I may not boast, because I know what it's like when I try to work my way into a good Lent, and it's not pretty.

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
Yea, all I need in thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Chipping away little by little at our poverty and wretchedness and blindness, granting us sight, riches, healing: that's what God's work in Lent is all about. And if your Lent hasn't gone so well, there's still time to submit to the rough work of being saved.

If we could only know how much God loves us. That's what both our Epistle and our Gospel emphasize. "God so *loved* the world," Jesus says; "out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses," Paul says. I hope you have known, as I have known, human love at its best: at once fierce and gentle, at once possessive and generous, a fire that wants to sweep every obstacle out of its way so that we can cling to the one we love, perfectly and unstintingly and without reservation. It is a love that cannot bear to be separated from the beloved, a love that is broken-hearted and grieving when there is anything in the beloved that remains unlovely, ugly, resistant. And this human love is the tiniest flicker, the merest glimmer, of the boundless, piercing light of the love of God. You must know that he cannot bear to be separated from you, not for a moment, not by any sin, not by any negligence, not by any unkind word or unclean habit. He cannot bear it. And so he longs to go on saving you:

Just as I am, thy love unknown
Has broken every barrier down.
Now to be thine, yea, thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come.

I think we can never marvel enough at the audacious generosity of God's plan of redemption. "I cannot be among them as one of them," he said, "so I will take their nature upon me. I cannot bleed for them, so I will take their blood and make it my

own. I have no body to be broken for them, so I will take a body like theirs and let it be broken, and brutalized, and made something hideous. And as the Israelites had to look on the very thing that was killing them, and so be saved, they will look on what they have made of me, and know my love, and be saved.”

We have been saved, and we are being saved. We return again and again to the Cross, to see the fierceness and the gentleness, the possessiveness and the generosity of God’s love, a love that cannot bear to be without us, not for a moment, a love that will go to any length—that *has gone* to every length—to save us, and to go on saving us.

And that is why one altar call isn’t enough. The love that God has for us is a love that cannot bear to be separated from the beloved, a love that is broken-hearted and grieving when there is anything in the beloved that remains unlovely, ugly, resistant. And there is, I know there is, so much in me that remains unlovely, ugly, resistant. The Son of Man must be lifted up again and again, so that whoever believes in him— whoever runs to him for salvation, whoever trusts, sometimes against all the evidence, that our divine lover is afire with an unquenchable passion for us— may have eternal life.

One altar call isn’t enough. So it’s a good thing that we have an altar call every Sunday in the Episcopal Church. The Son of Man is lifted up, and in the body broken and the blood shed we receive the pledges of his love, and he goes to work in us in a mysterious way, so that we may keep becoming what we eat, the unloveliness made lovely, the ugliness turned to divine beauty, and our very selves transformed, so that we may become fit partakers of that heavenly banquet where our reservations have, no thanks to ourselves, but all thanks to him, been made for ever secure.

Just as I am, of thy great love
the breadth, length, depth, and height to prove,
here for a season, then above:
O Lamb of God, I come.