

God and People of All Faiths

SERMON · Crossing Every Boundary: God's Love for All People · 21 August 2016 (the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

John 10:16 (quoted)

John 10:14-18

Jeremiah 32:27 (quoted)

Jeremiah 31:34 (quoted)

Ezekiel 36:23 (quoted)

Deuteronomy 7:7 (quoted)

Matthew 24:14 (quoted)

Matthew 26:26-28

Luke 22:20

God is the God of all people. Over the centuries, a great theological argument has been waged over the question of for whom Christ died, the issue being the positions taken on the extent of Christ's atonement to mankind, known as limited atonement and unlimited atonement. Those who hold to limited atonement teach that Christ died for the sins of a specific community; those who subscribe to the idea of unlimited atonement, a position I support, maintain that Christ died for the sins of all humanity. Whichever way you look at it, everything revolves around the death of Jesus on the Cross for the redemption of the people whom He has loved through eternity. I would like to remind everyone of what happened on that day when our Lord Jesus died on the Cross at Calvary: because of that event, which took place some two thousand years ago, the very course of this world, and the hearts of the human race, have been altered.

Let us understand that it is not man's prerogative to arbitrarily determine who is, and who is not, a child of God; the Lord Himself decides that, and no one can draw any conclusion on the matter independent of what the Scriptures indicate. From as far back as the Old Testament, God has been telling us of His love for His people; yet it was in Christ's death on the Cross that God was able to declare and demonstrate, emphatically and with boundless, matchless love, His love for the lost world. Remember, friends, Christ died not only for His friends, but for His enemies too.

One assertion I want to make at this point is that we, as Christians, have no right to monopolise Jesus Christ. This was precisely the mistake the Jews made in Old Testament times, and the same mistake is being repeated by many Christians even in our own day.

The question before us, then, is why this apparent discrimination exists within Christianity. If it is present even among Christians, it is no surprise that some of us deny those who are not Christians access to the one and only Triune God. Let me try to dispel this fallacy. In Jeremiah 32:27 we read: "Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for me?" God is self-existent; it is He who gives being to all creatures, and He is,

in a particular sense, the God of all men, their Maker and Preserver, and the One who provides for them. God, being the only God, is the God and Governor of the world, and of all people in it; if we believe that, we must also agree that all people are His subjects. There are none who may rightly be called godless.

The Old Testament represents the Old Covenant. Technically, the Old Covenant began in Exodus, with the Mosaic law given through Moses (Exodus 20); throughout His three years of earthly ministry, Jesus Himself operated under this covenant. Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant in the upper room, just before His death (Matthew 26:26-28; Luke 22:20), though this covenant has yet to be realised in its full prophetic fullness. Jeremiah 31:34 is particularly noticeable in this regard: “And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” And God spoke yet more explicitly, saying, “And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the LORD, saith the Lord GOD, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes” (Ezekiel 36:23).

The book of Acts tells us that the apostles continued to operate more or less under the Old, Mosaic, Covenant; the presumption may have been that the fulfilment of the New Covenant awaited the physical establishment of the Kingdom of Jesus on earth. It is no wonder that this same presumption seems to have carried through the centuries, into doctrines adopted by different sections of the Christian community even today. While we like to think that we understand salvation, many Christians remain unwilling to share it with people of other faiths, who are equally entitled to it, since it is Jesus who will judge, and not us. How that will unfold in the end is a profound mystery of God, one we do not know, nor can fully comprehend, even were we to be told.

The question of circumcision, or of the terms on which the Gentiles were to be admitted to the Christian Church, was a burning question of the apostolic age; for circumcision was to the synagogue what baptism is to the Church. It is upon the resolution of this very conflict that the peace within the Church, and the success of the Gospel beyond it, as Jesus mandated, depended. Had circumcision been retained as a necessary condition of Church membership, Christianity would forever have been confined to the Jewish race, and to a small minority of converted Gentiles. The Epistles, especially those of Paul, established the sufficiency of faith in Christ to secure admission to the fold of Jesus Christ; the progress of

Paul's mission among the Gentiles forced the question to a resolution, and resulted in a great act of emancipation, though not without great struggle and temporary setbacks, even opposition from none other than Peter.

I should like to argue that God is the God of all people, irrespective of their caste, creed, or faith, using two passages: one from the Old Testament, and the other, the Gospel text appointed for today. In Deuteronomy 7:7, God addressed the Israelites, saying, "The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people." The most simplistic, but erroneous, reading of this passage might suggest that God had in mind only the Israelites, while in fact He acknowledges the existence of a far larger population besides them; it was not, as a matter of fact, any merit of Israel's own, but God's mysterious love for the whole of humanity, that led Him to make Israel instrumental in bringing all people into the fold of believers. Many professing 'Christians' today mistakenly believe that they alone are the people of God, just as their Jewish counterparts once believed of themselves; and the Israelites, for their part, failed in that responsibility. Just as God chose the nation of Israel, He has chosen us, with a mandate that it is our own responsibility to spread the Gospel, the Good News of salvation, to every corner of the world; the need is there, because of the cardinal fact that God is one, and that all people should know Him.

Jesus said, "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd" (John 10:16). When we read this alongside what He said after His Resurrection, the matter becomes still clearer to us. Matthew reports, in 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come."

Friends, God, being the only God, is the God of all creation, and that includes all people, of all faiths. God looks upon the condition of your heart, not upon the faith that you profess, or fail to profess. God is not confined within a box, belonging to any one group of people; the days of using God to elevate ourselves above the rest of the human race should now be over. I will leave you with this question: what is the state of your heart today, and what are you doing about the mandate of Jesus Christ, our Lord? Amen.