THE CROSS, OUR ACCESS TO INTIMACY
LENT 4, YEAR B
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Peter Abelard was the most gifted theology teacher of his day. The wunderkind of twelfth century Paris he drew pupils to him from all over because of his disputation and logic chopping skills. But we remember him mostly because of the passionate love affair he had with his pupil Heloise. Its intensity was such that it broke through all the containment boundaries thrown around it. The secret marriage they contracted did not in the end appease Heloise's guardian, who sent his servants to overpower Abelard and castrate him.

Almost immediately Abelard and Heloise took religious vows, and eventually went on to rebuild their lives. But as their subsequent famous exchange of letters shows they each took a different view of these calamitous events. He came to thank God for what had happened in rescuing him from a disastrous wrong turning in his life, and in enabling him to focus on what he was really good at without any further carnal distractions. She, however, had taken the veil out of despair, and could not bring herself to regret all that had passed between them. "The pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet – they can never displease me, and scarcely be banished from my thoughts. Wherever I turn they are always there before my eyes, bringing with them awakened longings and fantasies which will not even let me sleep."

Despite this hollowness at the centre of her vocation she rose by sheer ability to become Abbess of her convent, and the founder of several other houses. To read the letters that passed between these

famous two is to trace the evolution over the years of a fierce attachment relationship into a friendship grounded in God with new reasons for personal hope and considerable gifts shared to the benefit of their respective communities.

Apart from generating one of the most famous love affairs in history Peter Abelard has handed on to us another less well-known gift. Our theologies of the atonement, our understanding of what Christ did for us on the cross, range between two polarized opposites. On the one hand there is the objective view, that the cross brought something new into the world that wasn't there before, that it somehow changed the structure of reality in such a way that a new resource became available to break the power of evil. The phrase, "all history passes through the cross" originates from this school of thought.

Peter Abelard pioneered the exemplarist theology of the atonement, which stands at the opposite end of the spectrum. That on the cross we see innocent, suffering love which draws and attracts us to enter into a relationship with the source of that love. We want to leave our sins behind because we can see what they have done to the vulnerable Lord of life. Christ crucified is the defenceless one who is appealing to us with no other inducements than our capacity for empathy and our love of the good. It is a point of view that has immense devotional power, and is perhaps the most influential among believers today. It certainly helps me to make sense of that phrase we heard this morning that, "The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life."

The lifted up Jesus who attracts and changes us by the drawing power of love - what do we understand is going on in that transaction? Here we have to think for a minute about the kind of Jesus who is presented to us in St John's gospel. What a contrast to that passionate, action packed, very human Jesus we have been hearing about in Mark these last few weeks. The Johanine Christ is calm, majestic, in control, knowing exactly what is in the hearts of those around him. A rather cool customer and perhaps a little hard to get to know, you might think, on first meeting.

But the deeper you read into the text the more you come up against a curious paradox. The Markan Jesus preaches a gospel of universal love, but he never actually loves anyone in particular. The closest he gets to it is with the rich young man whom he loves for the innocence of his wholehearted attempt to keep all the law. But these feelings never ripen into a continuing friendship. They disappoint each other, and go their separate ways.

By contrast the Johanine Jesus concentrates on his intimate circle and singles out particular people who are allowed to get close to him - the beloved disciple who rests on him at table - Peter, who is drawn back into loving closeness in that dialogue on the beach at the end of the story. The long section of extended speech running for chapter after chapter just before the crucifixion is lit up with this warm glow as though we are looking in on a dinner party for close friends. The Father and the Son are close. Jesus uses the word "in" to describe their relationship. They have collapsed all spatial boundaries between them. This intimacy is in turn shared with the disciples around the table. They are the in-group basking in this warming love.

“Are you my special friend?” The question we anxiously put to our teenage intimates. Yes, the Johanine Christ can unhesitatingly say to his followers. In fact that is the problem with John’s gospel. It is lit up with the continual contrast between light and darkness, and this isn’t just a contrast between good and evil. For when we live in an intimacy world where particular friendships and special people abound then a whole lot of other people will always be on the outer. Our non-intimates will be off in the darkness, people of little account, just background props for our hothouse relationships. That is why religious communities used to discourage particular friendships. They were aware that they could lead to cliques, favouritism, and relational exclusion zones.

We will come back to these difficulties in a minute. The important thing to hang onto is that the Johanine Jesus is someone with a particular gift for friendship. He can reach out and form bonds even with people like Nicodemus who can’t intellectually grasp what Jesus is on about, and who don’t want to move away from the comfort zone of being with the powerful. Even more than that, Jesus can generate new community while lifted up on the cross. When on Golgotha he gives his mother and the beloved disciple into the care of one another he is forming the nucleus of the new community. He can detach himself enough from his own sufferings to reach out and bring these two into a new pattern of relating out of which will emerge the circle of God’s friends in the future.

The cross as our access point to intimacy - a startling thought. We live in a world that is obsessed about intimacy. But the more obsessed we

get the less there seems to be of it about. Often the images of intimacy that we are offered are narcissistic and self –absorbed, the product of sentimentalists and pornographers. As always the problem is how to get close to someone without overpowering them or sucking them dry, or having that happen to us.

Satisfying relationships, genuine closeness follows on from having the discernment to choose those who are emotionally healthy, personally reliable and actually available for the enterprise. There is a death to self that is necessary to get to that place of personal wisdom of saying maybe this is not the right time or the right person to try for that much. And we die to self many times before make inroads on the possessiveness and emotional greediness that wants to make some people ours alone. When Jesus said that in heaven there is no marriage I think he meant that there are no exclusive or possessive relationships. There we can be close to people without thereby excluding others.

What Jesus started on the cross was a school for loving, a group who would extend his gift for friendship across the generations. In an outstanding example of unselfish loving he showed what true friendship really is, and continually invites us to try for that much in our lives. Because when we get the selfish self out of it, our relationships really work and we come to understand what intimacy is all about.