

Falling in Love - 27 Sept 2009
(Remembering how *it* began)
St George's Anglican Church

Readings:

OT	Psalm 51:10-12
Epistle	Ephesians 2:4-10
Gospel	John 10: 1-6

Key verses: *Restore to me the joy of your salvation*
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me (Ps 51:12).

Yet I hold this against you: *You have forsaken your first love* (Rev 2:4).

There's nothing quite like it. I remember falling in love with Angela at age 11. She sat across the other side of the classroom. I never ever spoke a word to her, but I was in love with her. I was unable to get her out of my mind – I couldn't sleep properly and I waited anxiously for each new day so that I could go to school just to look at her.

That's "puppy love" – and had no impact on the future direction of my life.

Other loves do, and that is what is behind the reference to love in the 2 key texts.

Psalm 51 was written by David after he had been confronted by the prophet Nathan about his grotesque self indulgent adulterous conduct with another man's wife, and when the reality of that struck he was distraught with guilt and anxiety because obviously he had lost the influence of God in his life. He expresses his desire to come back to the feeling he had when he first discovered the comforting presence of God as his friend and guide, but he had become so self sufficient and powerful as king that he had let go of the anchor humble dependence on God, and he had been pursuing his own agenda. He wants to be reminded about how it all began and so his prayer is something like this (see Ps 51:10 -12) -

Please purify my heart – please don't leave me – please bring me back to the joy and happiness I had when you first found me, - and please give me the strength never to let this happen again.

He's yearning to remember how he felt in the beginning. Does that ring a bell ?

In Revelation 2 although the purpose for writing is quite different, there is a connected idea because the one criticism the Spirit has with an otherwise good and faithful church, is that it has moved on from or left behind it's original fervour (vs. 4). Love produces unsolicited openhearted honest devotion – a bubbling enthusiasm, and although this church was obviously anchored in doctrine and discipline, what it did was now out of duty and habit. Does that ring a bell ?

The messages are the same in a way. Don't ever forget how it all began, because to be reminded of the unique experiences that we had when we first discovered God will enthuse us afresh to carry on in faithfulness and discover more.

Our beginnings with God will all be different. For some there will be a day, perhaps even a moment, when it all began. For others it will be the dawning of understanding and realisation, maybe gradual, that resulted in a growing willingness to trust God more; but for all, there will be that time when whatever happened impacted on our lives – changing us and our outlook and giving us love for God that we vowed we'd never lose.

We ought to remember it– it ought to remain firmly in our memory as something never to be forgotten. It did happen: it was real because it changed our lives. It isn't a myth or something that we now interpret differently like a revisionist historian. Our memory of it should anchor us afresh for the future.

For some of us, the beginning was a long time ago, and because of our experiences in life and its twists and turns, and the ebb and flow of our own faith (which is the human journey), we might now look back on our earlier times of bubbling enthusiasm high energy and fervent devotion and re-interpret it. Age and time often feeds scepticism and so we can be

revisionists about our own experience and say that whilst at the time we sincerely believed what we said about God in our lives, now because we're mature, we see it differently re-interpreting our earlier experience rather than affirming it. Regardless – we can't deny what in fact has happened to us, no matter how much we try to re-interpret its significance. And so events that changed our lives and have impacted on the decisions we made for our direction are events that we must never forget. Restore to us the joy of our salvation: let's not become detached from our first love.

David was anxious that God might not be still there for him. If we accept that God would not have moved away from David, why would God moved away from you. Perhaps it feels that way but as I see it, you being here this morning speaks of God still being by your side. Something happened in your life at some time that made you start coming to Church. You mightn't remember anymore why you come to church. Perhaps now you come out of habit or to please someone else. For whatever reason you come, the fact of the matter is that you are here, and that is because God has not let you go. Let us never forget how it all began.

My wife and I were at my sister's home one evening recently with my brother and his wife, going through a collection of 35mm slides of our parents who were long gone. My sister needed the family together to go through them before they were discarded in case there were some that we might have wanted. The photos were raced through the projector and there were few of interest to us, but every now and then one of us would yell "Let's see that one again....who was that.... remember that horrible outfit Mum made you wearetc?"

One slide came up of a bride & groom. I looked at the couple and the bride struck me as particularly beautiful. I peered at the photo and looked across the room at my wife who was peering intently at it too, and then we looked at each other and suddenly realised that it was our wedding!! I shouted out "Hey that's us. You're gorgeous!" and Doreen replied "You weren't too bad yourself!"

Suddenly (and for a few days after that!!) our 39 year relationship was electrified because that moment of recall brought back all of the memory of the excitement of the beginning, and the power of the recollection made it seem as though it was just yesterday. But moreso, it had the effect of reminding us of the magic that began it all. Of the love that made each

other irresistible - of how we couldn't get enough of each other and of the attraction that began our life together. When there is love and joy we tumble headlong into surrender to someone because there is so much beauty and power and the memory of that is a factor that can keep us going.

We must be careful though, not to fall into the trap when remembering how things were, of wanting it to happen again. Watershed experiences that change our lives are unique and are often catalysts to something else, and so even if we could make it all happen again, it wouldn't be right for now.

(Story – coming home from work when first married cf. coming home from work now 40yrs later)

C.S Lewis spoke about this – the yearning to repeat a wonderful experience. If only we could have a feeling back again, or duplicate an event in the hope that we would get the same thrill as we did when it happened first.¹

Lewis used a German word *Sehnsucht* - to explain yearning or wistful longing for something to happen again, and pointed out that the longing is more thrilling than the event would be, if it could happen again. So when we ask for the joy of our salvation to be restored, or that we remember our first love, it is not to go back. It is to stimulate us to move on. Maturity will mean that we move beyond our first experiences. Iain Gow talks about a *new season* for St George's, an invitation to step into something new and not replay the past. The writer to the Hebrews spoke of leaving first teachings and going on to maturity (Heb 6:1). Remembering ought to empower us to move on, by reminding us of how God did change us, and by stirring us to see God act again.

In a few minutes we will be having Holy Communion, which we call a remembrance feast and in it we recall the words of Jesus – *as often as you do this*. We love this, because this is a ceremony by which an experience

¹ See The Taste for the Other (The Social & Ethical Thought of C.S.Lewis): Gilbert Meilander, *Eerdmans 1978* p.14

that was not ours becomes ours. We were not at that last supper, but had we been there we would never have forgotten it. Those who were there, would until their dying days, have remembered and remembered and remembered that last meeting with Jesus and by those memories, have been stimulated again and again and again to move on with the Risen Christ and discover the depths of his promises. Their remembering would not have resulted in a revisionist reassessment of what happened or indeed to question in hindsight whether it happened. It did happen, and it changed their lives. They would never forget.

The words used by Jesus when He said *do this to remember me* as recorded in the Greek included *anamnesis*, a word that means more than simply the recall of an action long buried in the past - it means the recall of a past event that now before God and in God's presence becomes operative here today by its effects.

We are most blessed by the provision of a gracious loving God who helps us remember, and so let us too return to the joy of our salvation and the fervour of our first love.

Stan Thorburn