

Sunday 19th December 2021 – Fourth Sunday of Advent: LOVE (Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 1:46-55)

Last month I attended a wonderful Confirmation Service. 13 candidates from around Milton Keynes were declaring their faith, and their desire to walk with Jesus, including two from our partnership, and it was an hour of great joy amidst such a difficult year. The key point of every confirmation service is when each candidate kneels before the bishop, who lays a hand of blessing upon them and says: 'God has called you by name and made you his own.'

The idea that God calls us by name is a very special and intimate truth. To God, we are not just one indeterminate blob of humanity: **God calls each of us by name**. And the root of this lovely phrase goes back 2,500 years, to the very passage we read from Isaiah today (verse 1): 'I have summoned you by name, you are mine.'

Perhaps some of us have mixed memories of being summoned by name. We may think of our name being called in the school register, or perhaps for something we did wrong, and feel a little frisson of fear. But perhaps a better image would be of playing hide and seek when you were kids. You would hide in a cupboard or under the bed and your mum or dad would come up the stairs calling your name. You'd be hiding but desperately hoping you'd be found – and when you were, there would be squeals of delight and laughter. God calls each of us by name.

The idea that God is love is foundational to our faith. And yet, although references to God's love are everywhere in scripture, it's only very rarely that God says it directly to us. But God says it to his people here in verse 4: **'I love you...'** What an amazing thought: that God loves *us* – not just 'people' or 'others' but each of you. And because I love you, God says, I am going to do some other things for you – I the God who made you and formed you.

We've already noted the first of these: **God will call us**. In fact, he has *already* called us: 'I have summoned you by name, you are mine.' And this God keeps calling. He is persistent: just as he walked in the garden in the cool of the day, calling out to Adam and Eve, so he is still at work in the world, calling people – calling you and me. God calls – our task is simply to listen and respond.

And to those who hear his call, he says another glorious truth: **'I will be with you.'** God doesn't just look on from afar, he is with us. The great message of the coming season of Christmas is that God comes into this world: Emmanuel, 'God with us'. And this God is with us in the hard times: in the flood and the fire. And how we need that encouragement at present. Many of us feel like we are deluged by a flood of challenges – we need to hear that still, small voice which speaks: 'when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.'

Or maybe the fire image speaks more powerfully to you – and I think God uses both here precisely so that each person can respond to the one which touches them. It's an acute crisis – a fire – which is burning you up. And again, God speaks: 'When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, the flames will not set you ablaze.' Like the fire-walkers, God strengthens our soles – and our souls – to navigate the coals and out the other side. This too shall pass.

Finally **God will gather us**. Gathering is hard at present – and about to get harder. But this passage reminds us of a greater gathering: a global one, drawing God's children from across the world, united in heart, mind and spirit. It happens whenever we set our hearts to worship God, to meet with him in word and prayer – and my prayer is that whatever the coming season brings, we can feel that connectedness with others, whether we have the privilege of being present with them in person or not.

So today we celebrate the God who is love, who calls out to us: 'I love you'. In a few moments' time, we'll commemorate God's supreme act of love, by sharing bread and wine. And I think one of the reasons that the story of Mary, whom we particularly think of this Sunday, is so important to us is that it is so personal. God calls to her directly by name: 'do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God.'

Our calling may not be as huge as Mary's, but let those words of the angel be ours too: 'Do not be afraid, *you* have found favour with God.' The God who loves us and will be with us. And may our hearts swell in response, just like Mary's: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.' Amen.