

Beloved of God?

Perhaps we can be helped by remembering how Jesus forgave the woman taken in adultery in John 8, promised eternal life to the robber crucified beside him in Luke 23:43, and as the risen Jesus in John 21, trusted Peter again. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15, the way the father treated *both* of his sons clearly images God's love for us.

If such examples seem too difficult for us to emulate, we might be encouraged by noticing how the first disciples were certainly not perfect. They squabbled among themselves about who was the most important, tried to send away children brought to Jesus, and deserted their leader when he was captured. At times Jesus became frustrated and saddened by them, yet he kept on loving and forgiving them, treating them as beloved by God.

As baptised Christians we know we are God's beloved. We are called to demonstrate this truth by working to bring about God's reign on earth through forgiving, serving, encouraging and respecting one another. This is the way we are to behave, not only towards fellow members of God's Church, but all people, because all are made by God in God's image and are therefore beloved of God. Also, importantly, we are to extend our care and respect to the whole of God's loved creation of which we are a part.

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Christians who meet together to worship God are ordinary people who love God and care about others. We may be one of those in the photograph, or could easily be. But who are we basically as baptised people of God?

When Jesus emerged from the waters of the River Jordan after his baptism by John the Baptist, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God, like a dove, descended on him. Then Matthew. in 3:17 (NRSV). tells us that a voice was heard from God declaring, 'This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased'.

God identified Jesus as 'beloved', using a Greek word which also means, 'dear' and 'worthy of love'. Can such a wonderful description be also applied to us who have been baptised into Christ's body? Dare we even suggest such an identity as a possibility?

In the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, now seldom used, near the beginning of Morning and Evening Prayer, the congregation is urged to confess their sins. The priest or leader of the service does *not* start this exhortation by addressing the people as, 'You sinners and spoilers of God's world...', but instead begins, 'Dearly beloved...'. Is this some sort of weird mistake? Surely he or she knows full well, being one of us, that we need to 'acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness' before God, so that they might be forgiven?

We might think of 'dearly beloved' as just a quaint expression never used these days. But, what if it means what it says, about the church community which often fails and harms those in its care, *and* each one of us?

Paul, in his letters, often called the church in various places as 'beloved' or 'God's beloved'. Even when reprimanding gathered Christians, Paul still addressed them as 'beloved'. Individual Christians, such as Persis and Timothy, were also called 'beloved' by Paul.

In the Book of Common Prayer and in Paul's Epistles, 'beloved' is used to describe people like you and me. How can 'beloved' be applied to us who sometimes act with love and compassion, but at other times wound and damage others? If it is true, how can it affect the way we view ourselves, other people and creation?

When we were baptised we were declared sons and daughters of God, and one with Christ as members of his body. Being marked with the sign of the cross, we became 'Christ's own for ever'. We belong to God, and wherever we are, we are never alone.

Like Jesus, we received the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us in revealing and sharing God's love in the church and world. We are indeed, God's beloved!

But being dearly loved by God has consequences. In 1 John 4:11 we are told that as a result we ought to love one another. Perhaps be responsible for each other?

It is relatively easy to believe that our loved ones and friends are God's beloved, but what about others? Can seeing them as 'beloved' make a difference to the way we speak to, and about, them? If they have hurt us, should we hold them in a state of being sinners or can we free them and ourselves to begin a new relationship of love? We are called to show others compassion and forgiveness rather than criticism and rejection.

To bring about such a change in our outlook takes time. We may need to pause, and reflect on what we are doing, when we are tempted to judge groups of people or individuals and imprison them in labelled boxes. It is not always easy to see others we dislike, or prefer to avoid, as God's beloved.