a special love

An unexpected beginning

Jonathan became one in spirit with David. He made a covenant with him because he loved him. (1 Samuel 18: 1-3)

A reluctant farewell

David bowed down before Jonathan, with his face to the ground. Then they kissed each other and wept together. (1 Samuel 20:41)

A final tribute

I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother. You were very dear to me. Your love was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women. (2 Samuel 1:26)

The Bible says we should love everyone. We all know that. When they asked Jesus to sum up our entire moral duty to one another, he did so in a single sentence: 'love your neighbour' he said. And when a smart Alec demanded whom exactly that word 'neighbour' included, Jesus replied by telling his famous story of the Good Samaritan – a story that basically says your neighbour is anyone, anyone at all. It doesn't matter what race they are, what colour, what age, what religion, what gender, what sexual orientation – your neighbour is absolutely any other human being whose life happens to intersect yours. You are to love everybody, said Jesus – you are even to love your enemies.

But today, we are here to celebrate a different kind of love; a love which cannot be given to everybody because it is a highly selective love, an exclusive love, a special love. This love is not a moral duty owed to all; on the contrary, it is a personal choice – an optional extra even - and its distinctive feature is that is invested not in everybody but in a single individual.

The Bible calls it covenant love. And there is no more poignant example of it than the story of **David and Jonathan**.

Jonathan was a royal prince, the son of King Saul. David was a good-looking shepherd boy with a gift for winning fights. It was after one such famous victory against a giant called Goliath that these two young men met. That's when the Bible tells us:

Jonathan became one in spirit with David. He made a covenant with him because he loved him.

A covenant in the Bible is a strong promise made in the presence of God that joins two parties together by an unbreakable bond. You don't make a promise like that unless the other person has a unique place in your heart. It was so for David and Jonathan. They were 'one in spirit' we're told.

An interesting observation that, don't you think? When the philosopher Aristotle was asked 'What is a friend?' he answered: 'A friend is a single soul dwelling in two bodies'. It's that kind of mysterious interpenetration of identity that the Bible seems to be describing here. You could translate the Hebrew original: 'the soul of Jonathan was bound up with the soul of David'. It's an exquisite idiom that powerfully conveys the intimacy and mutual devotion of these two men. They were, as we might say rather more glibly today, 'two hearts that beat as one'. Where does that unison of soul come from? I don't think any of us really understand it, do we? There is something mysterious about it, almost magical – the Bible suggests it's rooted in 'the soul', which is the deepest architecture of our human personality. They met, and a profound fire was kindled which neither of them wanted or dared to extinguish; it cried out to be sealed by an unbreakable promise – it was, as I say, a special love – covenant love.

Sadly, covenant love between two human beings cannot always fulfil the vow that pledges it. Sometimes we promise beyond our strength or in defiance of circumstances which are just too great for us to overcome. It

was so for David and Jonathan. Jonathan's father, king Saul, disapproved of their relationship you see, for he was insanely jealous of David and even plotted his murder. To cut a long story short, as a result of the conflict of loyalties this provoked, David and Jonathan eventually had to split up, a casualty of a political rift that bordered on civil war. Their parting was immensely painful – we are told David physically crumpled under the grief of it, burying his face in the ground.

Then *'They kissed each other and wept together'*, as they so reluctantly were forced to say goodbye. I guess some of us here have known a critical severance like that in a special relationship. Such emotional devastation remains burnt into the memory for a lifetime., doesn't it? You never get over it completely.

Of course, the question that you are all longing to ask, faced with all this kissing and weeping at their parting, is did the special love that united David and Jonathan have a <u>sexual</u> component to it? Now I'll be frank with you. Some biblical commentators are convinced it must have done, whereas others are equally adamant that such an idea is quite unthinkable. My own view? I judge that those who insist they know the answer to the question tell us more about their own prejudices than they do about David and Jonathan, for the fact is the Bible itself is completely silent on the point … and therefore so must I be.

But I will tell you this; David was a ladies' man. The girls mobbed him in the street like a popstar, and he wasn't slow to take advantage of that popularity. He had affairs with dozens of women – he married six of them and sired at least 20 sons together with an unspecified number of daughters. So David certainly did not lack experience with the <u>opposite</u> sex.

Yet here is a remarkable thing; as you probably know, in addition to being a great soldier David was also a great poet and musician – most of the hymns in of the Book of Psalms are his composition (including of course the one everyone knows – the 23rd Psalm – 'The Lord is my shepherd'). And yet, as far as we know, David never wrote a love song for any of the many women in his life. One love song and one only from the pen of David has been preserved in the Bible, and significantly it is dedicated not to a woman, but to Jonathan.

It is a song of immense pathos and poignancy, for it is also a requiem – it was composed after Jonathan's tragic death on the battlefield – and, to be honest, I would not mention it on a happy life-affirming day such as this, were it not for a single extraordinarily revealing line that this broken-hearted lament contains:

I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother. You were very dear to me.
Your love was wonderful, <u>more wonderful than that of women</u>.

Does that suggest there was an, albeit tacit, sexual dimension to their love? I don't know and to be honest, I don't really care. I just know this was a special love - covenant love. And a love like that transcends sex – the Bible describes sexual union as becoming 'one flesh' - but we read David and Jonathan were fused as 'one soul' – deeper than just sex then - the love that united them was one of such intimacy, such commitment, such devotion – it was, by David's own testimony, more wonderful than that of women. And (let's face it) he should know!

It was, I say, a <u>very</u> special love.

Fortunate is the man or woman who finds such love - irrespective of its gender – deep down all our hearts ache to find a love like that. Do you know why? Because this kind of love is the nearest we human beings can ever get to the love of God – the love shown to us in Jesus.

Yes, that's a special love too – for in Jesus, God does not just love us with the passing generalised benevolence of a good Samaritan – he loves us with the intensity, the passion, the personal commitment of David and Jonathan!

It was a Jewish prophet, actually, who first anticipated this - coincidentally he was also named Jeremy (though we usually know him as Jeremiah)!

One day, he said, the Lord will make a new kind of relationship with us human beings - a relationship that touches and transforms the deepest places of the human heart – a relationship pledged by a promise that can never be broken and which you can therefore utterly rely on – a relationship that will satisfy the depths of your soul and last forever – Jeremiah called it 'the new covenant'.

And many years later, one awesome night in an upper room in Jerusalem, Jesus announced its arrival. Sitting at a supper table on the night before his crucifixion, he took a cup of wine in his hands and said to his friends gathered around him:

This is the new covenant in my blood. *Drink it*.

Ever since then, Christians have found assurance of God's special love for them in that cup, and Jesus' death on the cross which it represents.

There's a famous Christian in the Bible that I expect you've heard of - coincidentally he too was an Italian citizen named Paolo! This is how he, Paul, described his personal experience of that new covenant that Jesus inaugurated:

The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.

Do you hear the personal intimacy in that singular pronoun – loved me? I say again, Jesus does not love us with just the generalised kindness of a good neighbour. He loves us with a special love – a covenant love – but because the capacity of his divine heart is infinite, he is not limited to offering such love only to a single individual – no, **he loves each of us as if there were only one of us to love**.

Jeremy, Paolo – you are very fortunate people – you have found a special love in one another – a special love like that between David and Jonathan. We are thrilled to celebrate that love with you as you make your covenant promises to one another today.

And on this wedding day I can offer you no better advice than this: make Jesus the model of your special love. There is no love in the world more fulfilling, more securing, more dependable than the special love he has promised to us.