

Dear Friends,

At times of transition there is a tendency to reflect on what we really believe. I guess that I have been doing a little bit of that. If I were freed from the constraints of my calling, would I still hold the same beliefs? This is a weighty question. There is a common phenomenon sometimes called 'virtue signalling'. I take this to mean jumping on ethical bandwagons in order to demonstrate in the court of public opinion or social media, that we are "good people", without pausing to gather, analyse and weigh the facts.

Take for example the frequent assertion that God loves all people unconditionally, which is sometimes inferred from Biblical teaching. I have been struggling to find a verse in the Bible that categorically teaches this. It may be a valid opinion but is it a part of Christian doctrine?

What we do know is that Luke portrays Jesus as having a special care for the poor, the powerless and the vulnerable. Jesus demonstrates 'greater love' giving His life for His friends. Jesus loved us while we were still His enemies. But what we also see in the gospels is Jesus exhibiting righteous anger. Religious people who hide behind rules to control others but who fail to adhere to the spirit of the rules themselves find themselves judged. So do people who cause 'one of these little ones' to stumble. It was better for them to have a millstone tied around their neck! Jesus speaks of two paths – a broad one that leads to destruction and a narrow one that leads to righteousness. Jesus speaks of the separation of the sheep and the goats. I wonder what He meant by that. How does that square with the notion of unconditional love?

We are told that love is of God, and 'God is love'. When we love we are showing that we know God. Love is at the heart of the two great commandments as well as Jesus' new commandment. We are told that God's love embraces the world (John 3:16). I believe that God's love is purposeful, transformative, redeeming and saving. Holman Hunt's painting depicting '*Behold I stand at the door and knock*' reminds us that to receive God's love we must open the door of our hearts. The door must be opened from within. When we do that, we can enjoy a covenant relationship with God.

God bless you

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister