

God's love and ours – 1 John 4:7-21

Love works. Perhaps love is like a river. Love is a drug. Love, love me do. Love hurts. Somebody to love. I love Paris in the springtime. If the recipe for successful country music song is three chords and the truth, then it seems that the recipe for a successful pop song is a tune you can hum, and the word 'love'.

I think it's fair to say that the word love is often overused in modern society. Why say 'like' when you can say 'love?'. The word 'love' is trivialised. We see it everywhere, and hear it every day...it's easy to get a bit blasé about love.

People today say they love all sorts of things. The sound of rain on a tin roof, chocolate, hot chips on a cold day, a plan comes together and so on.

But love, in the strictest sense, and the sense John talks about in today's reading is about relationships between people. Our modern translations of the scriptures translate four words from the original Greek as 'love' and they are all related to strong affection – and strong personal connection – and strong relationship.

There is 'eros' which is – romantic, sensual, passionate love. Spousal love.

And there is 'storge' which is family love, parental love.

Philia, which covers deep friendship, brotherly and sisterly love. The strong bonds of community. What we might call fellowship.

And finally there is 'agape' – unconditional, unchanging love.

Love is big, but I think that we all can relate to these different types or aspects of love, because, hopefully, we've experienced them – and we know that there's a difference between the love of a wife for a husband, and the love of a parent for a child.

Love is big. And John, the disciple and author of this letter, knows something about it. You might remember that the gospel attributed to John identifies him as the 'beloved disciple' or the 'one whom Jesus loved' (eg John 13:23).

As we heard two weeks ago, he begins chapter 3 with "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God" (3:1a) and then went on to explain in last week's reading "We know love by this, that he laid down his life us." (3:16a)

And this is an astounding idea. To the non-Christians of John's time, this would have been shocking – crazy stuff. The good news of Jesus – that he would die on the cross for us – for each one of us and for all of us – was preposterous. Without the spark of belief – without the Holy Spirit working in people's hearts – the Gospel of Jesus, goes against the usual experience of life.

Think of how the most people in the world experience life: poverty, high infant mortality, recurring famine, epidemics, natural disasters, seemingly endless wars war. And even in safe, prosperous Australia, so many people are homeless, and many people struggle to make ends meet. The message that there is a God who cares and who loves can be difficult to grapple with.

Nevertheless, as Christians we persist. Many churches put up signs every Christmas with the words of Jesus from John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son”, and we read many characteristics of God in the scriptures. That God is merciful, that God is just, that God is slow to anger, and so on. But in this case it’s not a characteristic: In verses 8 and 16, John doesn’t tell us simply that “God is loving” but he tells us the very nature of God – that God is love.

God is love.

And because God is love, God sent his son to become one of us, to bring his love – his divine love, his defining love: not to judge us, not to condemn us, not to trick us, not to toy with us but to join us, to live a fully human life; to be born, to live, to suffer, to die, all out of love - and to rise again to show that nothing, not even death, can extinguish that love.

But John doesn’t just tell us that God is love, but he tells us what that means for us:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. (4:7)

Isn’t that a wonderful thing? Love comes from God. So let us love one another. In response to God loving us, John tells us that we must love one another.

And indeed, verse 8 of this morning’s reading tells us that if we do not love, then we don’t really know God. That is: We don’t know God by keeping commands or by being good people, but if we know God and if we love God, then that love will show in our lives.

Proclaiming that "God is love" is not easy, it’s not simply a nice saying. It is a bold confession. And it demands a bold commitment from us. How will anyone believe the claim that God is love, unless they see it among us? How can anyone take that claim seriously, unless we show that love in our lives?

What do you think outsiders say of Christians? Do you think outsiders will say “Those Christians: They really love other people”? Or do you think they’d say something else?

Christians say they love, but so often they – we – don’t show it.

Claims that we hate the sin, but love the sinner, are so often followed by condemnation rather than forgiveness. Christians so often focus on sin, rather than love.

We must work to love and work to show our love. Having been loved by God, we must love, and not only those closest to us or those who are easiest to love; our love must extend to places and to people where love is hard to come by, where love is absent, where faith in love has faded or died, we must love the people we don’t like, love the people who don’t like us, and even love people who do evil.

We need to take God’s love to those who just don’t know it or don’t accept it, to the outsiders, the broken, to those who have lost hope, and not by simply to telling them that God loves them, but by showing them that it is true. We need to demonstrate that God loves them through our lives and our actions.

No one will believe in God's love unless they see it in action, and if they don't know God's love they won't know the gospel, because the love of God and the gospel of Jesus can't be separated.

Love isn't simply an emotion – it's not just a warm and fuzzy feeling, it's not just something that we must grit our teeth and do. Loving people, is something that we should be motivated to do, because we have first experienced that love for ourselves. God showed his love for us through action – through sending his son to die and rise for us – and so our love must also show in action.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians spells out what it means to show love:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a)

And while that is a popular reading at weddings, Paul isn't especially writing about the love of a husband and wife, but the nature of love itself – agape love, unconditional, unchanging love.

And while we read “Love is patient, love is kind”, John tells us that God is love, so we could also read it as “God is patient. God is kind...” and so on.

Verse 12 says that “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”

No one has seen God. But everyone can see love. Remember the words of the new commandment in John's gospel which I've referred to a few times as we've been looking at John's letter? “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Or more poetically “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love, one for another”. That is the identifying mark of being a follower of Jesus, of being a Christian – that we show love. It's not going to church or reading the scriptures or praying – although those are very good things – the mark of Christian is simply showing love.

John says: Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (4:11)

It is a simple thing, but it's certainly not always easy. In fact, sometimes it's very difficult. We are human and we live in a fallen world, and it doesn't take much human experience to understand that things aren't right. There is suffering, there is pain and there is death.

But in the face of all that... remember that God's love came into this world. God sent his son into the world of natural disaster, persecution, disease, suffering and death. Jesus walked as one of us. He was hungry in the desert, he was rejected and persecuted, he

mourned for John the Baptist and for Lazarus, he was arrested and beaten and humiliated, he was executed, and he suffered death and was buried.

But the fallen world, couldn't overcome the love of God. In Jesus, God's light – God's love – shone into the darkness, but the darkness couldn't overcome it (John 1:5).

And today, throughout the darkness of our world and our lives, it is God's love that sustains us; God has sent the Holy Spirit to live in us – John tells us that “This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” (4:17-18)

It's an amazing thought that love drives out fear. Most of all we've seen it in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross at Calvary – Jesus who was in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying earnestly for another way out, gave himself up to die for others – to die for us.

We see it in the book of Acts: Stephen proclaiming the good news of Jesus even as he was being stoned. We see other martyrs throughout history giving up their lives in love.

But these weren't acts to earn God's love – they were done in response to God's love. In all things “We love because he first loved us.” (4:19)

And our love must be genuine, and it must not be selective. God's love is for all, and so must our love be, because: “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” (4:20-21)

I said earlier that loving isn't about having warm and fuzzy feelings. And it's easy to take this morning's reading in that way. God is love. In this is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us. We live in him and he in us.

And that is good stuff.

But there is also a tough message in there for each one of us and for all of us as the church. How do we love in our lives in the same way that God loves us?

Who do you love?

Who do you find hard to love?

And how do you show your love? How should you show your love?

It can be daunting to contemplate, and even more challenging to show our love to the world.

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (4:12). Let us all open our hearts to love one another, even as Jesus has loved us.

Amen