

“THE LOVE OF GOD”
1 John 4:7-21

Ah, love! As Mae West once said, *“Love conquers all things except poverty and toothache.”* Another screen legend, John Barrymore defined love more prosaically: *“Love .. the delightful interval between meeting a beautiful girl and discovering she looks like a haddock.”* But it’s central to our lives, isn’t it? Of course, it takes many forms – the love of a parent for her child, the somewhat different love of a child for its parent, the love of friends, the love of books or ice cream or Manchester United or solitude. Even between human beings, love can take many forms – romantic love: sacrificial love: lust: hero worship and so on.

And love seems to be the main subject of so much music and literature and art. Just try and think of three songs and I’ll bet at least two of them are about love. Think about any book you’ve read, any play you’ve seen, any film you’ve watched and somewhere in it there will be some kind of “love interest”. And in many of the cases it will be unrequited love, the love that is not returned, the love that is spurned.

Why is love so important for us as human beings? Well, I reckon it’s because we are, as we were thinking about last week and according to the way Christians believe it, made in the image of God. We somehow reflect in our humanity something of the character of God. The love that is at the heart of our world, at the root of our relationships, the thing we are all hungry for is a part of the love of God that he has put within us. It all comes back to God’s love and without that we just couldn’t get on. In the words we’ve just read from John’s first letter, he writes that we *“rely on the love God has for us.”* And why do we rely on it so much? Because, as John writes twice in these few sentences, *“God is love”*. Without God and his love, we have – we **are** – nothing. We touched on this last week when we were thinking about how we will one day be like our Father God again, but let’s just look at that a bit more closely.

1. GOD IS THE SOURCE OF OUR LOVE (v7)

The first thing John tells us is that *“love comes from God”*. That’s pretty obvious really, because everything we have comes from God. But it needs restating again and again. And, unlike all the other things that are part of our world, which God created, God didn’t actually create love, because he **is** love. This isn’t something God made and gave us. This is a part of himself that he put within us. It’s very easy to look at other people who are not Christians and dismiss them as godless and worthless, but the more you read the Bible closely, the more you will discover that there is something of God in everyone. The very capacity for love is a sign that we are made in his image.

A few sentences later, John says “*We love because he first loved us.*” Without God we cannot really love at all. Now some people have a greater capacity for it than others. Some people seem more loving than others. Some people accept love more readily than others, but there’s a germ of it in all of us. I don’t think it’s any coincidence that the man writing this letter with so much in it about love is the man who wrote the fourth gospel, one of Jesus’ disciples, who always referred to himself in the story of Jesus as “*the disciples whom Jesus loved.*” We rely on the love of God because it is at the very core of our being. Without it we could not love others or receive love from others. Without it we would be less than human, like an animal that can show *affection* – especially if it wants something – but cannot initiate or really demonstrate *love* as we can.

2. GOD SHOWED US HIS LOVE (v10)

And, as I say, our love is a reflection of God’s love – it’s not the other way round. Of ourselves we are incapable of love, certainly of love towards God. Without God’s love, what we call love degenerates into self-serving affection – like a cat that wants its dinner – or lust – the old *Book of Common Prayer* in the introduction to the marriage service says that the state of holy matrimony “*is not by any to be taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly, to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding.*” We show our love to one another because God has first shown his love to us.

This is the very heart not only of our humanity, but of the Christian gospel. *V10* here sums up what God’s grace is all about. God loved us first. He took the initiative in reaching out to us. You see, our own human lives had been spoiled by the presence of evil, of sin. The loving relationship we should have had with God had been distorted – and, in place of that deep sense of peace and wholeness which God created in us as an aspect of his love, we found rebellion, disobedience and pain. Sin had distorted things so much that we could not reach God by ourselves. But he could reach us and so he sent his Son Jesus into our world to be the means of restoring that relationship.

When Jesus hung on the cross at Golgotha, when he acted as a sacrifice for our sins, he was showing by his action that God loves us in a way that is almost beyond our imagining. He was making it possible for us to receive God’s love and giving us the example, the motivation to love others as well. He was restoring our humanity. It means that we do not need to fear the future now (*vv17,18*): we will stand before our Creator when we die in the sure and certain knowledge that he loves us and wants us to be with him for eternity.

3. GOD SUSTAINS US WITH HIS LOVE (v12)

That's something that we look forward to. But God sustains us in the present with his love. As we acknowledge the love that God has shown for us in Jesus, as we believe him and rely on that love, so we regain that part of our humanity that allows us to love others and to deal with the selfishness that so often characterises our attitudes and actions. In loving one another, we show that God is at work within us.

And the more we love others, the more we are able to experience and enjoy the love of God ourselves. That's what John is saying here (v12). God's love keeps us going. He loves us. We love him. But the sting for most of us is at the end of this passage – *“Whoever loves God must also love his brother and sister.”* If we claim to be Christians, then we have to show love, real love, to one another. In John's gospel, he records Jesus as saying that this is the way in which outsiders are to identify the Christian community. In *John 13:34,35*, he says, *“Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you [there it is again], you love one another. This is how everyone will recognise that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other.”*

I've been part of lots of different groups of people – communities, neighbourhoods, clubs, staff rooms, teams and so on – and I have to say, with some sadness, that some of those organisations and networks show more love and concern than I have seen in some churches (not this one, by and large). Fair enough, churches are made up of some collections of very strange individuals – but this is a **command** from Jesus! We are to show love to others because God has shown his love for us. There should not be cliques and factions in churches. There should not be strained and broken relationships. There should not be malicious gossip and criticism behind each others' backs. There should not be jealousy and envy. It's a marvellous ideal, isn't it? But it's an ideal that is attainable with the help of God – because God's love is not an ideal: it is a reality.

Listen, God loves you. You matter to him. You matter to him enough for him to have sent his Son Jesus to die for you. He wants you to be able to look forward to an eternal future without fear. Doesn't that have any effect on you? If it does, then you need to respond – not only to God by saying that, yes, you accept his love and realise that you need to rely on it, but also to those around you by reflecting God's love in all that you say and do, and in the way you say and do things. There's an awful lot of people who will never know anything of God's love unless they see it in you. *“We love because he first loved us ... And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother and sister.”* That should give us something to aim at for a week or two!