

## I John 4:7-21 Love, actually!

Have you noticed how the celebration of Valentines day is gaining traction here? I don't remember it being part of the landscape when I was younger and dating. But it's increasingly becoming an event to celebrate with the one we love. We're encouraged to buy cards, presents and book into expensive restaurants, all to show that we really love that very special person in our lives. Where would we be without Valentines day? (kidding of course)

Valentine's day celebrates a particular type of love. We might call it romantic love. The ancient Greeks called it *eros* - which is where we get our word 'erotic' from.

I'm told English is one of the hardest languages for a foreigner to learn. But in another sense, English is a particularly economical language. We have only one word for love - and it can mean so many different things! We use the word 'love' to describe the feeling we have for our spouse; it's a word we use when we talk about about our parents or our children, or how we relate to our mates and friends; we use the same word 'love' to describe how we feel about a place, or a sport; or we even a certain affinity we might have for chocolate....

But in the New testament, there are several words for love, each one used in a different context. For instance, '*philia*' is the Greek word that describes brotherly, or friendship-type love - heard of Philadelphia in the USA? - the city of brotherly love.

As mentioned earlier, the Greek word '*eros*' - describes that heady, passionate love that sparks a romantic relationship. And there are more, but the one I want to focus on is the word we find throughout our passage in 1 John this morning. The Greek word used is '*agape*.' - and it is how we describe God's love for us

*Agape* is the highest form of love. There is nothing self-centred or frivolous or shallow about it. It is completely other-centred. It's the type of love we very occasionally glimpse in human form when a soldier gives his life for his platoon, or when a mother or father is prepared to sacrifice their life for their child. It is how God loves us - a love graphically expressed in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for us.

John says, in v9, "God's love (*agape*) was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him."

Backing up a bit to verses 7-8, we read

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love (*agape*) is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love (*agape*).”

Back in the late 60s (Oh that makes me sound old!) - bumper stickers were all the rage. Anyone have a bumper sticker on their car? What did it say? A very popular one amongst our youth group leaders at the time, was “God is Love.” I had one on my little red Prince Skyline. Looking back, I wonder whether we really understood the depth of that little phrase. I don’t think I did.

These two verses are an exhortation to love one other. However, most important phrase in these verses is the last one - “God is love.” - because this is where our love for others originates.

What does it mean that “God is love?” It means that the very essence of who God is, his nature, his motivation, his actions, his communications — are all rooted and grounded in holy, overflowing, totally giving, affection, benevolence & kindness.

What is our concept of God? Do we see him as a strict, exacting overseer, ready to discipline us when we step out of line? Do we see him as unfathomable and unpredictable - a God we are never really too sure about? Do we see him as a distant figure, powerful, kindly perhaps, but not really interested in our personal issues? Or do we see him as pure *agape* love - wrapping us in deep affection and kindness, focusing on us personally and delighting in us - regardless of how we see ourselves? If our concept of God does not reflect this *agape* love, then we seriously need to get to know him better!

So God is love. Because of this, John encourages us to love one other. He points out that if this love between Christians isn’t evident, then there is something amiss in our relationship with God.

He says, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

In other words, if God is in us, and we are in God, this love for others will happen. It is a natural outcome of our belonging to him - it is as natural as an apple tree producing apples, or a grape vine producing grapes.

In our Gospel reading this morning - also written by John - we find Jesus talking about the very same thing. He says, in v1, “I am the vine; my Father is the gardener” and then in v4 he continues, “Remain in me, as I also remain

in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

It's such a simple concept, isn't it? Stay plugged into Jesus, connected to him as a branch is connected to its trunk. Remain in him and the love of God will sprout from us, as apples do from an apple tree or grapes from a grapevine. We don't have to drag it forth. If it feels like we have to drag love forth - whether that be love for God, or love for others - by the strength of our wills alone, then again, we need to get to know God better.

Though we 'remain in the vine' there will still be work to be done while we live on this earth, - even discomfort - and this same passage, Jesus talks about being pruned, so that we bear more fruit. But the bearing of fruit for a branch remaining in the vine is a given.

### **How do we 'remain in Jesus' ?**

1. Of course, we need to be sure **we are part of the vine in the first place**. That happens as we turn away from what we know to be wrong, believe in Jesus, and commit ourselves to serve him. We are then grafted in to the vine.

2. Then we need to **shed what we might call a 'dualistic mindset'**. By that, I mean that there can be a tendency for us to think of God as being separate from ourselves. Though as Christians, we firmly believe that Christ lives in us, sometimes when we pray, or think of God - we still tend to see him as 'out there' rather than 'in here'. Certainly that seems to be a common understanding of God in people who are outside the church. In secular thinking, God is 'up there' - or at least 'out there'. He is seen as separate from his creation.

I remember a funeral in my previous parish, where as the people began to file in to take their seats, one man was obviously reluctant to go inside. "Do come in," I encouraged him, "There are plenty of seats inside." "Nah, I'm right," said the man. "Don't want God to get upset with me, and for the place to fall in on my head." He seemed quite serious!

In this case, God was inside the doors of the church, but not outside where the man felt relatively safe! Interesting, that. I suspect the man was carrying some baggage.

Unfortunately, the indwelling presence of God can sometimes be more of a doctrinal belief than part of our actual experience.

This is where I see great value in the practice of Christian Meditation, or contemplation. If this is not something you've explored, I can recommend it. It's a form of prayer whereby we sit silently and reverently, focusing simply on God's presence within. Not praying, or praising, or asking for things; just sitting in gentle, relaxed, reverent silence, attentive to God who is within. Practised regularly, we find we become increasingly aware of God's presence in us.

Before I was called into ministry, a friend and I decided to start praying together. We weren't really sure how to approach these prayer times. Neither of us particularly wanted it to become a shopping list prayer time, where we just brought our requests before God. We weren't familiar with Christian meditation, however, we came across a series of short meditations on tapes given by Selwyn Hughes - (who wrote the Every Day with Jesus notes). With some gentle instrumental music playing softly in the background, the meditations began with a verse of Scripture, a thought to focus on, and then just silence - though the music continued to play softly until the end of the tape.

Through these times of silence, simply sitting with God, aware of his presence within us, it seemed God had the opportunity to reveal himself to us in a new way. We found, time and again, that we - almost physically! - sensed his divine presence. At times we dared not breathe, for fear it would fade! It did eventually - or we would never have gone home. But those experiences of the reality of God within us were transformational for both of us.

Our experience bore out what John said in v13

3. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because **he has given us of his Spirit.** 1 Jn 4:13.

There are of course many other ways to remain or abide in Jesus. There is the importance of being part of the Christian community, the value of study, the necessity of service; most include prayer; all require faith.

When we are able to nurture an intimate relationship with God who lives within us, our Christian walk becomes a simple and natural expression of the new creation we are in Jesus.

God's heart becomes our heart - and we want to serve.  
God's love become our love - and it flows from us to others.

As Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, says "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

God is love - and his love is at work in and through us.

Let us pray...