

Sermon – Sunday 2nd May 2021 (1 John 4:7-21)

‘In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’

All you need is love – so say the Beatles! Love is all you need!

Poets, writers, musicians and Shakespeare himself would all agree with these words. Because there is something so intrinsic about love that it soothes our soul, calms our blood pressure and basically it’s one of the best medicines for us.

Now, I’m not talking about romantic, chocolate box, gushy love—but instead something much deeper & fundamental to each of us as human beings ---that need to know that we are valued.

That we are precious! Important!

That agape unconditional love that accepts, welcomes, embraces, rejoices in our joys, our weeping with us in our hurts is the love that is addressed in our epistle passage.

The letters of John are thought to be written by John the Evangelist, the beloved disciple of Jesus who is also attributed as writing the gospel of John. The author isn’t identified by name, per se, but the clue is in the writer being the ‘presbyter’ elder. It’s thought that John wrote this short epistle in Ephesus around 90-110 AD.

The letter or epistle, is addressing a relatively new and emerging Christian community that is being drawn into Greek philosophical ways of thinking - and drawn away from the orthodox teachings of Jesus. Teachings on the basic tenets of the faith - of keeping the commandments, especially the commandment of Jesus to love one another.

This community were in danger of losing their identity and their beliefs. They were being drawn away from recognising the importance of the incarnation that God came fully in flesh and blood. Lived fully as a human being amongst us, whilst still being what we call God – man.

Fully God....fully man!

Some were favouring Greek mysticism & Gnosticism that taught that spirit and spiritual knowledge was superior to Jewish and Christian teaching and traditions.....that to attain perfection humans needed to transcend their humanity....hence God could not have been human (idea seen greater in the docetists).

The Christian community were surrounded by teachings that were alien to them.

As well as Greek mysticism, there was worship of - Greek deities – gods like Dionysus, Zeus, and Poseidon were worshipped as divine and were to be feared....people put flowers on statues to appease them; grapes from the harvest, to please them... to gain their favour!

There was a hope that these great & remote deities would leave them in peace.....not punish them...

It is against this background of fear and an understanding of the Greek gods sporting with humans, seeing them as playthings; or treating their lives as worthless, that we hear the famous 3 words used to describe God.

GOD IS LOVE.....That is a powerful statement!!

This statement 2000 years ago would have “blown the minds” of readers, those who first heard them said. Its impact can be likened to those who first heard that a man walked on the moon - or the breaking of the genetic code.

That’s how powerful and radical the words – GOD IS LOVE are!

We have domesticated them.

They have lost their power.

Somehow we have sentimentalised these words, and they are often linked somewhere in our psyches with the idea of an Adonis hero figure with a box of milk tray coming to show his love for us.

But we need to hear these three words – GOD IS LOVE in the same way we responded to the cracking of the genetic code! Something so beyond our everyday reality that it ‘takes our breath away wows us!’

One of the things that I love about the Bible when reading it in context is that it offers some astounding revelations that we’re invited to hear over and over and over again....

GOD IS LOVE!

Greek deities or gods – in the ancient world were to be feared. Capricious and cruel and used their power to serve their own ends. They were deceitful. They were petty and vindictive.

The Greek poet, Homer, in his poem the Odyssey, portrays this Greek understanding of the **1st Century** well. It’s a poem that tells of the journey of Odysseus, returning home to the island of Ithaca, from war at Troy. A modern interpretation of the story has also been aired recently on TV by classical historian Bettany Hughes who really draws you into the story.

It takes him 10 years, to return home on his voyage. Poseidon, deity of earth and sea inflicts disaster after disaster on him and his men. He’s kept a prisoner on the goddess, Calypso’s island simply because she wants him as her own.

On Olympus, the gods compete with each other, - using Odysseus as a pawn in their power struggles. So the gods were to be feared!!

And this view of the gods was fairly common. Getting involved with the gods was dangerous and to be avoided at all costs.

Socrates, the great Greek philosopher taught that the gods in Greek poetry were immoral and unworthy of respect.

It is into this ancient world of Greek philosophy and great intellect that comes a statement from an early, largely unknown Christian community that is beyond anything that the people have ever heard before. It is so radical and astounding that to the ancient pagans/greeks this takes their breath away. They are shocked at its absurdity! **GOD IS LOVE.**

That is why the Apostle Paul described the Good News of Jesus Christ as folly or foolishness to the Greeks.

Yet, when the chips are down....the Question we are all faced with is - what sort of God do we believe in? What sort of God do we worship?
What sort of God do we want on our side?

God is LOVE.

God's love is **so perfect** we are told that it **casts out all FEAR, v18**. In other words, the Greek deities, are inferior - they are worshipped from a place of fear!!!

Every now and again, we get news that leaves us reeling.... that takes time to absorb.

Like Odysseus, it seems that we are trying to navigate a course that makes no sense to us and we are looking for our centre, our compass, to try to steady ourselves; take in the magnitude of the shocksteady ourselves and navigate our course again.

We all have days, weeks like this.

In the past year, how many deaths of people we know, or where health issues or changes in employment status has set a chain of unforeseen circumstances for some that have changed their lives for ever – life kicking knocks!!

When we find ourselves in these situations..... we cling to the words of hope that anchor us, in our faith, in our life, in all that is good in the GOD OF LOVE. Because when the chips are down we want to believe that God IS LOVE.

To believe in this wonderful, statement from 2000 years ago, is to acknowledge the radical confession of the early Church and to hold fast to God's promises and faithfulness to always be with us.

It's not an escapist fantasy, or sentimentalist claptrap: the opiate of the masses, as Marx would say!

This radical statement of goodness, virtue and compassion and mercy is to be found in the person of Jesus Christ, fully human - fully God who draws alongside us. *There is no middle ground here.* Either we are bearers of a new truth about God or we are in the words of St. Paul, - above all to be pitied as the greatest of fools.

That is the way of the Gospel.

We are bearers of the message:

God is with you,

God cares for you,

God loves you.

Our epistle reads,

"Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Love is very important for John and he puts emphasis on it throughout his letter. Here he does this by drawing attention to the fact that love is rooted in God, who is, in fact love.

John re-enforces let us love one another with the reminder that 'love comes from God'. Love, as Christians understand it, is not a human achievement, it is divine in origin, a gift from God. If anyone loves in this sense it shows that, that person '*has been born of God and knows God*'.

The reason for this is one of the greatest statements in the whole Bible. God is love. This means more than '*God is loving*' or that God sometimes love. It means that he loves, not because he finds objects worthy of love, but because it is in his nature to love. His love for us depends not on what we are, but on what he is. He loves us because he **is** that kind of God, because God is love.

This kind of love is not found everywhere, or indeed anywhere as a human achievement. We know it only because God showed it when he sent his only son into the world. His purpose in doing this was to give us life. Life in the full sense comes to through him alone.

Our mission as Christians is to lift up love, as the hidden key to life, revealed in Jesus Christ. And to see ALL LOVE as an echo of the love of God, and to be drawn to this love and reflect it for the world and for one another - in times of pain, as well as times of joy....for it is at these times that we carry one another in prayer, and as a Christian community it is at these times that we are asked to love courageously, without limit.

For to say "God is love" is not sentimental, not easy. It is a bold confession and it demand a bold commitment and faith.

How will anyone believe this faith unless they see it among us?

How will anyone be convinced that beneath the pain and suffering of common experience flows divine love?

How will anyone know unless we live that way?

And I leave you with the some words from hymn (695) – ***Your love, O God has called us here, for all love finds its source in you, the perfect love that casts out fear, the love that Christ makes ever new.***

AMEN.