

**29 April 2018**

**John 15.1-8**

**1 John 4.7-21**

**God is love**

As one who uses words professionally, I have great admiration for those who come out with a memorable turn of phrase.

This week, remarkably, it was Emmanuel Macron, the French President, addressing the American Congress in his second language, English. He encouraged them not to ignore the threats that are posed to our world by climate change. And he offered this great punchline:

‘Remember, there is no planet B.’

Now I imagine that there is some anonymous speechwriter, basking in the publicity that this one sentence has attracted, as it has been repeated on news broadcasts around the world.

And it is a striking phrase from the pages of the New Testament that calls for our attention this morning – ‘God is love’.

The passage from 1 John that we have read is one of the most remarkable passages in the New Testament. It essentially redefines God; it redefines love; and it redefines the relationship between God and humanity.

### 1. The redefinition of God

We begin with the statement, the assertion, that is at the heart of this passage. Indeed it is repeated: God is love.

The strangeness of this phrase has become masked by familiarity. We have become so used to hearing it that its oddity is lost. John, the writer of this letter, is pushing grammar to its limits in this phrase.

In both Greek and English you would normally expect someone to say ‘God is loving’, or that ‘God loves’. You would not expect the phrase ‘God is love’.

It is a poetic turn of phrase to express something extraordinary about this God about whom he is speaking. Of anyone else you might say that:

- They have love
- They show love
- They express love
- They love

But John stretches language to its limits. He needs to say so much more than this. It's not enough to say that God loves. What he has learned about this God in Jesus forces him to use language in a new way, to express the new situation. It is not just that this God is loving ... It is that God is love itself. God's very being is defined by love.

This is about, if you like, the DNA of God. What makes God God – and what makes God 'tick' - is that he is love through and through.

Love is not just one of God's characteristics among many others. It is his defining characteristic.

Of course, in order to talk about God we will have to say many things about him:

- His otherness
- His holiness
- His mystery
- His power
- His freedom
- His transcendence

In terms of what God does, we will have to describe his work in a myriad of ways:

- He creates
- He calls
- He guides
- He warns
- He judges
- He liberates
- He redeems
- He restores

But in saying that God is love John is saying that all of these qualities and all of these actions are expressions of his love, and are shaped by his love. So God's

power and God's judgement are not are not additional to his love, or separate from his love, but are always expressed in service of his love.

The mystery that is God, becomes not just the mystery of the unknowable, but the even deeper mystery that the unknowable One at the heart of all things holds this universe in love and has opened his life to us as an offering of himself to us in love.

God is love ...

Love is not ... the latest 'project' of God ... as if God could have been God without being loving ... as if he could have chosen to be selfish or vengeful or indifferent ... or even alone ... What is being said here is that God is love through and through, from beginning to end

Love is not just one side of God's character, nor even the most important side of God's character – It is not that God is predominantly loving ... as long as you get him on a good day ... or as long as you don't get on the wrong side of him ... It is saying that everything about God is shaped and defined and moulded by the love that is at his heart.

This is revolutionary stuff – a re-defining of God ... that we are still trying to get our heads and hearts around.

## 2. Love redefined

Love, especially in English, is a very slippery word.

When I say 'I love fish and chips', I do not mean quite the same thing as 'I love my grandchildren'.

When I say, 'I love baking bread', I do not mean the same thing as, 'I love my mother.'

And even when we are talking about relationships the word 'love' means different things in different relationships. So the love that I have for Sally, my wife, is rather different to the love that I have for Tim, Phil and Tom, my sons ... and different again to the love that I have as a pastor for this congregation ... and different again to the love that I have for the suffering people of Syria, for example.

Now it is true that the Greeks had a number of different words for love, each with a different focus:

- Eros for intimate/sexual love and love of beauty
- Philia for friendship – affectionate regard. It was often used for love between equals.
- Agape for acts of service to others, willing the good of others ... more often used in unequal relationships
- Storge – the kind of affection or sympathy that a parent might have for their child

... Nevertheless, even with more words to use, these words could slip from one meaning to another, and each of these words could have a range of meanings.

So, although John says that 'God is agape' - the word 'agape' could still mean any number of things.

And so John makes it quite clear what he has in mind when he says 'God is agape'. He defines this love for us.

'This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us and gave his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.'

First of all, he makes it clear that the most important love – the defining love – in our relationship with God is not our love for God, but God's love for us.

In both the Jewish religion and in Greek and Roman religions, there was an important focus on learning to love God appropriately.

So the key commandment of the Jewish scriptures was 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.'

And in a rather different way, in much of the pagan religions that were practiced in the Roman empire there was an important focus on keeping on the right side of the gods, doing what pleased the gods ... that could be summed up as learning to love the gods. And Greek philosophy had much to say about learning to love that which was most beautiful in the world, and most good.

But John says, the measure of love can never be our capacity to love God – whatever it might mean to love God. But the measure of love is God's willingness to love us

And that love is not woolly or undefined. It's not just a warm blur of general niceness. All that is at the heart of God's love is given concrete ... well at least fleshy ... expression in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Here is love expressed in human living and dying that is very specific:

- it has to do with vulnerability
- it has to do with self-emptying
- it has to do with humility
- it has to do with sacrifice
- it has to do with the building of community
- it has to do with forgiveness
- it has to do with cost and suffering
- it has to do with opening up an inclusive kingdom community
- it has to do with the courage and strength to give oneself wholly and to the end

Here is love that is far more than someone simply being 'nice and kind'. This is not a 'Santa Claus' vision of generosity – this is a deeply-earthed, cross-shaped vision of generosity that absorbs pain, suffering and humiliation in the service of deeper relationship and more inclusive community. What John calls an 'atoning sacrifice for our sins.'

Here is God taking responsibility himself for the breakdown of relationship, and putting it back on track again, through solidarity and suffering and sacrifice.

And this, suggests John, is not an extreme outlier in the examples of what love can be, but its defining centre. This is the love that defines who God is.

God is love is not an expression of a generally 'nice guy God' – it is an expression of love that goes way beyond all ideas of 'niceness' – a love that takes us to the least 'nice' place of all – the cross of Jesus – to discover its focus and its meaning.

### 3. Redefining the relationship between God and humanity

If God is redefined and love is redefined, then we also find that our relationship with God is redefined by this assertion that 'God is love'.

'God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.'

Life is complicated. One of the things that we do to try to make life slightly less complicated is to compartmentalise our lives.

We split our lives up into different compartments, into different bits, so that each bit becomes rather more manageable.

So we might separate our home life from our work life. We might separate our church life from our non-church life. We might separate our family life from our social life with friends.

And often we find ourselves taking on rather different personas in each of these different areas of life. Who we are at church might be very different from who we are at work. The kind of person we are with our family might be a very person that we are with our friends.

And one of the ways in which humanity has always compartmentalised their lives is to create a divide between the religious and the everyday:

- between our relationship with God and our relationship with others
- between the spiritual and the moral
- how we conduct ourselves in our rituals and our prayers, and how we conduct ourselves in our families and our work

And the result is that there has too often been a disconnect between these different parts of our experience.

The prophets of Israel were always reminding the people that despite all the care and attention they gave to their worship, their sacrifices and their rituals, if they ignored the cries of the poor, or if they exploited the weak all of their carefully planned worship, all of their precisely offered sacrifices meant nothing.

The prophets were deeply aware of this disconnect.

And what John does here in this passage, is make clear that there should be no disconnect at all. Because when we catch onto this idea that 'God is love' then spirituality and morality become all of a piece.

Our being at one with God, means being at one with God whose whole being is about this outgoing, selfless love ... and so it means getting caught up in the powerful dynamic of his love ... being taken over by the movement and life-force of this love so that this becomes the defining characteristic of our lives too.

Being at one with this God cannot then just be about moments of prayer and worship, of contemplation and meditation, of ritual and mystical experience – being at one with this God is a whole-life experience that rolls over into everything that we are and do:

- it affects who I am with my family and friends
- it affects how I function at work and at leisure
- it impacts upon my involvement in the structures of wider society, in politics and justice
- it shapes the moral decisions that I take and the values I live by.

Living in God is about living in love; and living in love is about living in God.

And this isn't to say that spirituality is now unimportant – It isn't to say that all that matters is how I live my life. So it doesn't matter whether I go to church, whether I pray, whether I have anything that can be called a spiritual life, because all that matters is that I conduct my life by the rule of love.

Because what John is saying here is that our capacity to love begins with God and begins in God ... and the deeper our life is grounded in God, the closer we are to the source of love, the more likely we are to sustain a life that is defined by love.

This is a radical redefinition of the relationship between humanity and God that brings spirituality and morality into a deep symbiotic relationship.

'God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.'