

SERMON – 20/2/22

1 John 4:7-21

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.”
(1 John 4:7)

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

(1 John 4:11)

“And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love their brother and sister.” (1 John 4:21)

This morning I want to explore with you how Christian discipleship is about loving. Unlike the much-loved comedy character of yesteryear who used to 'say zees only vance' the many biblical writers repeat today's key message again and again and again: 'Love one another'. Asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus replied: 'Love God and love your neighbour'. On another occasion, Jesus went further and told His followers: 'Love your enemy.'

Last Sunday we were facing the reality that for Christian disciples the world over the reaction of neighbours, friends and family to our faith and to its outworking in word and deed is not uncommonly one of disdain, hostility or even hatred, but as we seek to respond to that, we read in the First Letter of John this morning the old, old story, repeated three times in the verses with which I began: Love one another; love one another; love your brother and your sister.

'This is how we know what love is, we read last week: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us,' and now, as we continue on into the following chapter, we are led on in an exploration of love and of the centrality of Christ's self-giving in the revelation of what love is. Three interconnected aspects of love, I think, are fundamental to the Christian faith, namely love from God to human beings, love from human beings to God and love between human beings.

In the first place, all love depends on God, for as John writes here: 'God is love' and 'Everyone who loves has been born of God

and knows God.' In other words, without God's love, there is no love at all and so if we are to learn about love ourselves, an experience of God's love must be our starting place – back to the foundations we were speaking about at the beginning of these studies. It's very striking that three times in the verses we read this morning the apostle reminds us that 'God sent His Son' and each time he makes that statement he draws out a different aspect of God's love as it is revealed in Jesus. And what I would like to suggest to you today is that there are things that we each need to learn as we seek to be Christ's disciples and to live out the same love in our daily lives both towards God and towards other people.

Firstly, John says: 'This is how God showed His love among us; He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.' (v.9) We are being reminded here that Jesus Christ is God's 'one and only Son', that is to say Jesus is the full and final expression of all that God is. It really cannot be emphasised how absolutely vital it is that we grasp the centrality of the person and the work of Jesus Christ in the revelation of God – it is only as we begin to grasp the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ that we really come to know God. The fact that God's expression of Himself in Jesus is pure love presents us with a real challenge, though, as we seek to live through Him and to reflect that love. In returning our love to God, we have to ask ourselves whether He is the true subject of our worship or whether we allow other gods, other people, other things to usurp His rightful place. God's love for us is entirely wrapped up in Jesus Christ but how 'one and only' is our love for Him? How much of ourselves have we invested in Him? And in expressing our faith through love for other people we also have to consider the extent to which we are prepared to give ourselves completely in the way that God gave Himself to us in Christ. Do we love others as God in Christ loves us? That is a really tall order, but it is the challenge of the Gospel - "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Secondly, John echoes what he has written in the previous chapter, saying: 'This is love: not that we loved God but that He

loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.’
 (v.10) When we consider what that means, we have to take on board the wonderful fact that it was out of a concern for our very deepest need, namely to be put right with God, to be forgiven and made whole, that the Father sent His Son to die in our place. Atonement literally means at-one-ment and as we pause to reflect today on the way we respond to God’s love we have to ask ourselves whether we *have* been made one with Him, whether we *have* truly accepted His love, whether we *have* been reconciled to God or whether we are still holding out against Him, still holding back from giving ourselves fully to Him. If God sent His Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins and we have *not* been reconciled to the Father, then Christ died in vain. And when it comes to living out the love of God in our own lives, if we consider the nature of God’s love for us, reaching out to us in the depths of our need, then we need to ask ourselves whether in our love for others we act only superficially rather than considering what the deeper needs of others might be. It is not always the most loving thing just to offer a person what they crave – sometimes we have to lay ourselves on the line, lay our friendship on the line even, get right to the heart of a matter, painful though it may be, but open the way to real fulness of life. “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

Then thirdly, the apostle writes: ‘We have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world.’
 (v.14) John reminds us that Jesus came not for an elite group of those and such as those, but to be the Saviour of the *world*, of all sorts and conditions of folk. If we are ever tempted to think that we are not good enough to come to God, not worthy enough to express our love for Him; if we ever let it cross our minds that God might turn us away, then let us take hold anew today of the Good News that Christ is the Saviour of the world. Remember the stories of those who came to Jesus during His ministry on earth – the tax-collectors, the prostitutes, the lepers, the outcasts of society – and draw near to Him today assured of the welcome He promises to *all* who come to Him. But take note of the challenge that that truth lays before us as we answer His call to love not only God in return but also to love our neighbour,

because it compels us to love in just the same way – it is not for us to choose which neighbour to love and which to walk past; we are commanded to love all sorts of people, without favouritism. Who might that take you to this week, I wonder? It's easy to love the people who love you in return but Christ gave His life even for those who drove Him to the Cross by their hatred, those who unjustly accused Him and sentenced Him to death, those who drove the nails into His hands and feet – He is the Saviour of the world, and if we are to love others in the way that He loves us, that means that we must be prepared quite genuinely to offer a word, to hold out a hand, to turn the other cheek not only to those with whom we have nothing much in common but even to those who actively oppose us. "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

As we celebrate the Gospel of the love of God in Jesus Christ, it is right and good that we should exalt and proclaim what it is that God has done and what it is that He holds out to us, but it is vital that the Gospel does not remain only an ideal, something precious that is held up as an object of wonder – it is for living.

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God has given us the motivation and the inspiration to love – Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. He has given us the pattern and the example – Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. But now it's over to us – I won't say this only once; I'll go on saying it until it becomes who we are and what we do as Christ's disciples in this place. Let us love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength, and let us love our neighbour as ourselves. What will you do this last week of February 2022 to make that a reality right here in Kinross? As Bill sang earlier, "By this all will know you are my disciples, said Jesus, if you love one another." May the people of this community know that there are disciples of Jesus in their midst this week and let's just see what God will do with that for His glory.

Prayer – Lord Jesus Christ, we are overwhelmed again today by the reality of your eternal, ever-present, cleansing and transforming love for us and we want to worship you as we bow before you now, declaring our love for you, but we also want to share that love with those around us, not just those who are our fellow-disciples but also all those with whom we come into contact day by day and, yes, even those who make our lives difficult. Send us from here today in the power of your Holy Spirit to sing that love that can set all people free. Amen.