

If you loved Me

Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.*

A sonnet attempting to delineate the length, breadth, height and depth of love, and then realises that in reality one of the greatest qualities about love is that in its truest forms, and there are many forms, its limits are endless. Leo Tolstoy wrote in Anna Karenina, *"I think...if it is true that there are as many minds as there are heads, then there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts."*

Love is what makes the world go round; love is the many-splendoured thing; all you need is love; love is at the heart of what it means to be truly human. Without it we wither and diminish. With it we feel valued, special, safe and protected.

How often the child or adult without love leads a lonely, spiritless existence. Love can be the positive energy that encourages us to persevere and to overcome. Love is knowing that we are not, whoever we are, whatever we have done, left ultimately alone. God is where love is, and love is of God.

It may be hard to accept or believe, but God love us as we are. God loves us not because we are good, but because we are loveable. God's love is not conditional, like our love is for others so many times. We should not belittle God's love because we cannot fully live out the capacity for love that is within us. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more than God does already. Equally wonderful, there is nothing we can do to make God love us less, absolutely nothing, for God already loves us and will love us forever.ⁱ

As we are loved, so we must love others. Jesus says, *"Love one another, as I have loved you."* The American theologian Paul Raushenbush has said: *"We have a love crisis in our country. People are literally dying for lack of love."* Jesus tells us to love God with all that we have and are, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Dare we be that kind of Christian: dare we love that much? Love is an act of defiance. Love is the foundation of our church. It is the past, present and future of our church. Love is not the sole property of Christianity; it has its place in all the major world religions, and to those of no faith. But Christianity is predicated on love. To paraphrase Paul, if we do not have love, we are nothing. In our sometimes unkind, unloving world, love is almost becoming counter-cultural. It is not merely a theology; it is a practice. *"Orthodoxy is not enough; it must be accompanied by the practice of justice to one's neighbour."*ⁱⁱ

Love is what we are because of what we do and because of the One we are commanded to follow. If we have love, if we live love, then we are Kingdom people. *"Knowledge of God's love brings us close to the Kingdom, but to enter the kingdom requires something more. Loving God entails loving others and upholding justice and dignity for all... We know the Kingdom's cost but are often fearful of paying the price."*ⁱⁱⁱ If we want to live up to our calling to be children of God then we must display the family likeness, the family trait – and that is love. If we are to follow Jesus we must put God's love into practice and in ways that will challenge the world around us. To love

God and God's goodness now sounds strange to the modern ear. To love God's creation, and all God's children within it, including the unlovely and the unlovable challenges the perceived status quo of self-interest and magnified individualism that society too often endorses. To live Jesus' Kingdom love has to happen within our churches and far beyond their walls.

With God's healing love, we are called to mend the world, and in the mending of the world we will find that we mend the broken places in our own lives. This is what it means to love God and to love our neighbour. Society is judged by the way it treats its weakest and most vulnerable members. It is our task to be a blessing to the world. Our faith is called to create and sustain communities. Communities based on love. That sardonic writer Jonathan Swift wrote: *"We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."*^{iv} When we give up the burdens of suspicion, envy and hate and live love out loud in our world God's Kingdom comes near. *"It is a world where all are fed and housed, with access to clean water, health care, adequate education, and meaningful work; where none is excluded for reasons of race, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation; and where young and old are cherished, as God's family endeavours to sustain the precious resources of this fragile earth."*^v

The imperative of our faith is a love that reaches out to God and to neighbour. God's love is set to shatter the loneliness engulfing our society, that most depressing of diseases of the Western World. As the saying goes, *'A person wrapped up in themselves makes a very small bundle.'* A Church wrapped up in itself makes a very small bundle.

It is time to unwrap the bundle again, and remove the layers of doubt and fear, prejudice and ignorance, and leave, vulnerable yet invincible, the gift of love and let it do its unstoppable and irresistible work in our lives and in our world.

Jesus, in His farewell discourse in John's Gospel, sets love at the heart of His words. We're not going to be left alone, even though He has gone physically. The Holy Spirit is coming to breathe love into our sometimes-shrivelled lives and living. Those who love Jesus will hear His words and follow them. Those who follow Him will find when they need it most the inner peace that stabilizes our lives. That peace, which comes of love, that allows us to take a deep breath then go out into the world and face whatever we need to face, because Jesus is by our side. "...the peace of God is the confidence that God is God and neither our gains nor our losses are ultimate."^{vi}

"If you loved Me..." says Jesus. Are you sure you love Me? Have you taken the time to get to know Me? Do you listen to Me and engage with Me? Loving Jesus is not done at great distance; it is done up close and personal. Even when He has physically gone away, spiritually, in the air around us, in the blood coursing through our veins, **there Jesus is**. Loving us. Do not let your hearts be anxious, or afraid, or troubled, He says. When Jesus is present, peace comes to help us balance and recalibrate, and steady ourselves, and start again. A peace that is God's love for you. It may be that some here in Church, or watching on-line, need to hear this good news. Jesus loves you. Always has; and always will.

The Oasis Church in Waterloo concludes its invitation to friends and strangers with these words:

"This is not a private club – it is a community open to all people of goodwill. And, though we are not yet strong and vulnerable enough to show the unconditional love of God at all times, we hope we are moving in the right direction."^{vii}

Love in action is the route of experiencing Love's grace-filled indwelling. Love in action is the closest we come to evidence of God. The problem of, 'Why some and not others?' is unresolved. Nevertheless, the invitation to engage is not about theory it is about practice; it is not a

philosophical argument, but a passionate and body-tingling experience. It is about moving in the right direction, towards the Jesus Who loves you.

At the beginning of this week, whatever it will be for you, it is my hope and prayer that you will travel with Jesus'.

With love; in love; for love; by love. No 'ifs' about it.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Desmond Tutu, *God has a Dream*, p32

ⁱⁱ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p318

ⁱⁱⁱ Carol L Wade, *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, p376

^{iv} Jonathan Swift, *Thoughts on Various Subjects*

^v Wade, p378

^{vi} Fred B Craddock, *John*, p111

^{vii} Steve Chalke, *Being Human*, p241