

Sermon – Reading 1 John 4:7-21

For the next few weeks we are going to think about love. That sounds a bit mushy and sentimental doesn't it, however, if you try to describe in a nutshell the good news of Jesus Christ, one word is enough, love. Today we will examine God's love for us, and then in the weeks to come we will look at Loving our Neighbours and our Enemies, Loving all Creation and then to conclude the series we are going to look at Loving God, Loving Self. That's a whole lot of love.

Before we begin to immerse ourselves in the love of God I would like to read out to you the Psalm chosen for today by the church in its common lectionary. This psalm in its entirety including the bit the lectionary sometimes leaves out, (you will know which bit when you hear it) is a stark contrast to the reading we heard earlier from 1 John, which gives us a launching pad into understanding the Bible.

So here it is, Psalm 137

Psalm 137

- ¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
- ² On the willows^[a] there
we hung up our harps.
- ³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
- ⁴ How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?
- ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
- ⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.
- ⁷ Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!”
- ⁸ O daughter Babylon, you devastator!^[b]
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
- ⁹ Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

No love for our enemies in those last few verses. So what is going on here? Is the Bible being contradictory?

How do we honour the Bible as the inspired word of God when we read something that is so contrary to the good news of Jesus Christ? Well, one of the best ways of understanding our sacred text comes from theologian Brian McLaren who says the Bible, “is a portable library of an ongoing conversation about and with the living God”. If we try to read the Bible as rule book, a scientific text, a factual account of historical events or as the literal word of God, as if God dictated each and every word to the writers, we are in for a whole lot of messy contradictions and poor theological understanding. Today’s Psalm is part of the ongoing God conversation, an honest, unedited, brutal description of God’s people’s feelings and mental state. Much of the Old Testament could be described as people fumbling about, grappling, and wrestling with the nature of God and how that impacts the way they live and worship.

So let’s emerge from thinking about the darkness and messiness of human emotions in today’s Psalm into the light of 1 John, a passage saturated in phrases that speak of God’s nature as love. Let’s have a look at it again, with some of those phrases highlighted.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because **love is from God**; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, **for God is love.** ⁹ **God’s love was revealed among us** in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved **God** but that he **loved us** and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, **since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.** ¹² No one has ever seen God; **if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.**

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ **So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.**

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ **We love^[b] because he first loved us.** ²⁰ Those who say, “I love God,” and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: **those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.**

How clearer can this message about God’s nature and God’s love for us be? If you are the kind of person who likes to question things, like me, you may be wondering “if God loves us so much why then this world is so messed up, why is there suffering and heartache, war, and terror. I can’t answer that in a way that makes things black and white, nobody can, the scriptures however do offer us the beginnings of an answer. Although we will not see the

reason for suffering clearly until we see God face to face, Paul's speech to the Athenians does shed some light on 'why this life?'

²⁶ From one ancestor^[e] he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God^[f] and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For 'In him we live and move and have our being'

In this life of beauty and terror, we are free to experience the absence of love and therefore the absence of God, we are free to be as unloving as we like, and it is this freedom that creates a restlessness within us until we find Love. Think about what you know about humans for a moment, shouldn't be too hard because you are one, think about the times when we give in to our human nature, when we want to hurt others, when we seek revenge, (and Psalm 137 is a perfect example) when we seek only our own wellbeing, when we abuse the planet and rape its resources, when we seek comfort in things that can become addictions, at those times we truly experience the absence of God in our lives. For some of us this absence makes us seek meaning, a higher purpose and if we are lucky enough, if we fumble about, as Paul says, we do stumble upon God, who has been there all along, for indeed God is not far from each of us.

I would like to finish with a quote from C.S Lewis, of Narnia fame.

*Man does not exist for his own sake. 'Thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.'*¹ *We were made not primarily that we may love God (though we were made for that too) but that God may love us, that we may become objects in which the Divine love may rest 'well pleased'. To ask that God's love should be content with us as we are, is to ask that God should cease to be God: because He is what He is, His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable... What we would here and now call our 'happiness' is not the end God chiefly has in view: but when we are such as He can love without impediment, we shall in fact be happy.*

That is a very deep statement, and it needs some unpacking, here is how one commentator sums up Lewis' thoughts,

God loves us not because we are loveable but because He is love. And because He is love, He can only will what is best for us, which is to be transformed into a being of holy love like Himself. He will settle for nothing less. As we meditate on God's love for us, especially in the cross of Christ, our love for God and our neighbour will increase, and our hearts will become more and more like God's — filled with love. ¹

¹ <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/reflections-august-2016/>

I have thrown a lot of information at you today, and hopefully I have given you some food for thought, please give just a little bit more of your attention as we close this sermon in prayer.

Let us pray,

Oh Lord our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

At the beginning of creation you affirmed all things as good.

This goodness is our true nature.

After we have chased after money, power, status,

popularity, comfy lifestyles or the next high,

we turn back to you and see the goodness in all things,

we see ourselves as your good children.

and we abide in you as you abide in us.

Turning back to you feels like coming home.

Amen.