

Advent 4
“Love”
1 John 4:9 – 16

“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.

¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world.

¹⁵If any acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.

¹⁶And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.”

So today after reflecting on joy, and hope, we reflect on love.

It is difficult to give a message about love.

When you talk about love, even in a Christian context, you are up against it.

The difficulty of talking about ‘love’ is that we have to rescue this word from the way it has been used and abused in our wider culture.

Love has been so belittled, become debased and in so many ways today, is vacuous.

We have also sentimentalised it.

You know, it’s soppy. A little bit syrupy. It’s tame. It’s nice.

Warm fuzzies.

To Advent it says, “Where’s my baby Jesus in a manger who I can get clucky over? Where are the angels and the shepherds and lowing cattle?”

As a culture have sexualised it and romanticised it – in film, in television and so on.

And often to the two are linked together.

We've elevated romantic and sexualised love as the highest ideal.

Sally was born beautiful – there's no other word for it.
And she realised very early on that she could wield power through her physical attractiveness.
And so Sally had relationship upon relationship.
Sally found herself moving from one partner to another, being rejected and repeating the cycle all over again.
She would say that without a man in her life she felt invisible.
Sally also found that she couldn't bear to be alone and found herself in relationships with men who were deeply unkind or even abusive.
And of course Sally rationalised her relationships – it was just a one off; it was out of character, it'll get better; next time will be different – only to find the cycle happening again and again.
One day Sally had had enough, what she did do was find a good counsellor.
And in that process she was able to see that she was looking to men for her identity and to fulfil the deepest needs of her heart.
She said these words: "Men were my alcohol. Only if I was on a man's arm could I feel good about myself and face the world."¹

In turn this has given rise to what is known as "expressive individualism"; the greatest love is to find one's deepest self and then publically express that to the world, regardless of whatever family, friends, political affiliations, previous generations, or religion might say.

The medium that has embraced this the most is social media where "influencers" and celebrities try to convince us the self-love is the highest form of love.

Almost four decades ago Whitney Houston released the single "The Greatest Love of All".

It peaked at number 12 in New Zealand, but number 1 in Australia and the United States.

"The greatest love of all
Is happening to me
I found the greatest love of all
Inside of me
The greatest love of all
Is easy to achieve
Learning to love yourself
It is the greatest love of all."

¹ Timothy Keller

Not to be outdone four decades later Miley Cyrus released “Flowers”:

“I can buy myself flowers
Write my name in the sand
Talk to myself for hours
Say things you don't understand
I can take myself dancing
And I can hold my own hand
Yeah, I can love me better than you can.”

This excessive self-love has another word to describe it: narcissism.

What this self-love then says is, “Others *must* affirm and celebrate who I am and all of my decisions or they are spiteful, judgemental and hateful people.”

Of course that makes sense if you have been let down, disappointed and betrayed, and don’t know of a greater love.

These forms of love are not the kinds of love we find in Advent, in the coming of Jesus.

So I think we have to do the hard work of rescuing the love the Bible talks about from the dangers of sentimentality and excessive self-love.

We have to clear the rubble of misconceptions away and the best way to do that is to take people to the real Jesus.

If we don’t we end up this superimposing this love onto God, so that *God* affirms and celebrates who we are and all that we do.

One of the reasons why people avoid the real Jesus is that Jesus did and said seems very unloving.

Here’s a short list:

- Jesus, on more than one occasion he says to a sincere group of people, “You bunch of snakes!” headed to hell.²
- He said to another group, ‘You hypocrites!’³
- To the same group Jesus he said they were like tombs painted crisp and white - that are all clean and tidy on the outside but putrid and foul on the inside.

² Matthew 12:34; 23:33

³ Matthew 23.

- Another time Jesus committed an act of anti-social disorder by overthrowing tables in the public area of the temple.
- Then another time he's to one of his closest followers, "Get behind me Satan!"

This is the Jesus whose coming we celebrate at Advent.

My question to you is this; if everything Jesus did was an act of love, ***how is that loving???***

Tell the person next to you.

Here the thing: God's love is His deep affection for you. He is so, so fond of you, you know?

But not only is it His deep affection for you, in this deep affection he seeks your absolute best. Sometimes it's fierce.

That means all his actions are loving, even when we cannot perceive them to be so.

You see the opposite of love isn't hate or anger but indifference. Indifference sees what's happening, shrugs its shoulders, says "Whatever", and moves on. Love wants what's best for the beloved.

So 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.

¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

Jesus the Son of God came into the world to show the world amazing, undeserved, unachieved, unearned, love of God.

He showed this love among us in his teaching, in his miracles and healings, in his authority over demons, in his eating with sinners and tax collectors.

It was love that willing to die for our sins – for your sin and my sin. God loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

You might be thinking, “Oh no, Reece is going to talk about sin.”
And of course when some people hear that they say, “You Christians are always banging on about sin!”
It’s so judgemental and negative!

The irony is that for a vast number of churches in the last couple of decades is that there has been a silence about sin *because* they did not want to be seen as judgemental.

So it is true that at time we’ve talked about sin badly.
But talking about it badly doesn’t mean we shouldn’t talk about it at all.
What we’ve done badly we need to do better.

We talk about sin because we talk about God’s love.

Even as part Advent and the Christmas story is sin.
I mean Joseph after he discovers Mary is pregnant with a child that’s has nothing to do with him, has a dream.
And in that dream an angel appears and says to him,
“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because *he will save his people from their sins.*”

What does Advent and Christmas tell us?
The God in Jesus deliberately entered into this world marred by sin.

There is a problem in our human nature that all the self-help in the world can’t touch.
You see, all of us have an enemy called “mini-me”, this part of me and every one of us that wants to live a self-referencing life.

Talking about sin is also about telling the truth about ourselves.

Sin when first spoken of in Scripture is pictured as “crouching at the door” seeking to control and rule over us.⁴

What we often do in response is we hide sin, or indulge in it, or explain sin away or we try to ring fence it.
All we are engaging in is sin-management.

⁴ Genesis 4:7

Truth sets us free.

Jesus sets us free. Jesus consistently told people the truth only because it is His nature but also so they could be free.

Imagine a woman goes to a doctor for a check-up.

The doctor says to the woman, "You're in amazing shape. Your fitness is outstanding. You could run a marathon tomorrow, no problem at all."

The next day the woman has a massive heart attack and the staff in the hospital say to her, "Didn't your doctor warn you? You had all the indicators that a massive heart attack was coming your way."

So when the woman gets out of hospital, she calls up her doctor and says to him, "Why didn't you tell me how bad my situation was? When it comes to my health, I want to know!"

And the doctor says, "I didn't want to upset you."

God's love seeks our best even when it's hard for us to hear.

And with sin came the awful aspect of this current world called death.

Death itself is such a thief.

It robs us of those who we dearly love.

It's such a rip-off.

The Bible tells the story of Jesus when he attended the funeral of his friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha.⁵

It's here we find the shortest verse in Scripture, "Jesus wept".

Death is an enemy, an intruder in God's good creation.

So Jesus weeps with indignation at the pitiful, sorrowful scene of tragedy.

He feels the grief and hurt and pain and at death itself and the devastation it brings.

And then he raises Lazarus from the dead.

John's Gospel goes on to refer to the raising of Lazarus as being "sign."

This sign was pointing out to those watching that there is something of greater certainty for followers of Jesus than even death.

⁵ John 11

More certain than death is Jesus who has power over death.

All this because God does something radical – he takes our sin and our guilt and wrongdoing and our death on himself.

The supreme form of love is not in found in the arms of lover or looking inside ourselves but it Jesus the Son of God nailed to the cross.

He did it for you.

The crucified arms then become an embrace; God in Jesus reconciles us to himself.

The Son of God born in a stable was the Son of God who died on the Cross and rose again for you.

That's what love is.

It's this love which is the source of our love for one other.

It's this love that makes loving one another possible because if we're honest, at times, we're not always that lovable.

Sometimes people do stuff that seems unforgivable; yet the love God showed was forgiving love.

It's costly love.

You know to finish, it's one thing to talk about God's love, it's another to experience it.

We're told, "so we know and rely on God's love of us."

The word "know" is an experiential word.

God's love is meant to be experiential; to grip the mind and embrace the heart.

So to close we're going to sit in stillness, in quiet.

You want to adopt of posture of reception.

"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.

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

Dwell in the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit this morning.

God is has overwhelming affection for you.

He is deeply, deeply fond of you.

He won't betray you.

He won't walk out on you.

He gave his life for you.

He is utterly committed to you.

He delights in you.

He adores you; you are adored.