## **Week 2 - Understanding love – starting with God (21-27 Feb)**

Last week we looked at how we only seem to have one word - ‘love’ - to describe a multitude of meanings in English. We also began to introduce the significance of the theme of love in the Bible and noted that Christian literature and teaching does not always seem to reflect this emphasis to the same degree.

This week the reason we are concentrating on God is because the Bible makes the surprising claim that God *is* Love. (1 John 4:8). In other words, if we are trying to define love, or find out more about love, then we need to understand more about God. God may not seem the first place to start when thinking about love but the Bible makes the radical claim that in order to understand and even define what love is really all about, then God is the right place to begin.

1. When you think of God, what kind of thoughts do you have? How much does *love* feature in these thoughts?

### **What is God’s love like?**

The Bible makes claims that God’s love for us precedes our response to God and is sacrificial. One of the most well-known verses in the Bible also tells us about the extent of God’s love:

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send him into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world may be saved through him.”* (John 3:16-17)

### **What about God and love in the Old Testament?**

Sometimes it is claimed the God of the Old Testament is different in nature to the God described in the New Testament. Is this really the case?

1. What do you learn about God’s love from the Old Testament texts on the next page? You can use the space below to write notes if you wish. If in a group you might want to divvy up these references between you as individuals or in pairs.

Deuteronomy 7:7-8

1 Kings 8:23-24

Nehemiah 9:16-18

Isaiah 49:15

Isaiah 63:7-9

Isaiah 66:13

Jeremiah 31:3

Hosea 14:4

Joel 2:13

Zephaniah 3:17

**Bible Verses about God’s Love in the Old Testament (as referenced above)**

**Deuteronomy 7:7-8** -*It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples.****8****It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

**1 Kings 8:23-24** - *‘O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart,****24****the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand.’*

**Nehemiah 9:16-17**- *‘But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments;****17****they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.’*

**Isaiah 49:15** - *Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*

**Isaiah 63:7-9**- *I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised according to all the Lord has done for us—yes, the many good things he has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses.* ***8****He said, “Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me”; and so he became their Savior.* ***9****In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.*

**Isaiah 66:13** - *As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.*

**Jeremiah 31:3** -  *the Lord appeared to himfrom far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*

**Hosea 14:4** - *I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.*

**Joel 2:13**-  *Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.*

**Zephaniah 3:17** - *The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew youin his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.*

## **Jesus tells us about the extent of God’s love**

Another extraordinary claim of the Bible is that if we wish to know more about what God is like, and therefore how love is defined by God, then we need only look at Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is reported as saying these words*: ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’* (John 14.49).[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. What do you know about Jesus that informs us about God’s love? Try to think of all that you already know.
2. What additional information about God’s love through Jesus can you find in these verses:

**Matthew 9.35-36** - *Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.****36****When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

**Matthew 15.32** - *Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.’*

**Luke 7.11-13** - *Soon afterwardshe went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him.****12****As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town.****13****When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’****14****Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, ‘Young man, I say to you, rise!*

**Luke 24:34** - *Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing.*

Continued overleaf

**A whole other level: The Trinity and love**

Every time we recite the Creed, whether it is the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed, or very occasionally, the Athanasian Creed, we pledge our belief in the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How is this relevant to the theme of love, you may ask? The answer is that the relationship of love between the distinct ‘persons’ of the Trinty is so strong we properly think of God as ‘one’ or completely united.

**Read John 17: 20-24**

1. What do you learn about love in the context of the trinity from this passage?
2. What does this passage say about the relevance of that love to us?

Jesus’ prayer in John 17, especially verses 20-24, speaks to a depth of relationship God wishes to have with us, as well as us with one another. Indeed, this is a profound part of understanding that God is love. As we shall see next week, this triune God is seeking a relationship of love with everyone.

**Before next week: If you can, please read John’s Gospel chapters 13-15**

**For Further Study**

## **In the Bible it is God who defines love**

*John’s epistle put it like this:*

*‘Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. …*

*Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.’* (1 John 4:7 & 11)

**The New Testament writers clearly saw that God’s sacrificial love was very carefully based and prefigured in the Old Testament**.

For example:

* Luke 24:13-27, esp. v27
* Genesis 22:1-18 is the story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice his son Isaac but in this Old Testament story it is God who provides an alternate, foreshadowing the sacrifice of God’s own Son.
* Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 are among many other Old Testament passages that contain powerful echoes of the accounts of Jesus Christ’s atoning death.

**The Trinity**

Orthodox and Coptic theologians, whose Eastern Christian tradition has generally been stronger on the Trinity than the Western Christian tradition, talk about the creation of the universe and the world, as well as Jesus’ incarnation and the redemption on the cross, as all stemming from this pivotal, astonishing and overflowing love relationship within the Godhead. We are very familiar with the words from Genesis about human beings being created in God’s own image but in the West we have usually associated this with each individual human person. This is not an entirely accurate portrayal of the Genesis text. Instead, Gen 1:26 says: “let us make humankind in our image”.

It does not take much experience to realise the quality of our relationships with one another, and specifically a relationship of love with one another, is vitally important for us as human beings, whether as individuals, or as groups of people. The biblical claim is that this is because we are made collectively in the image of God, and therefore how we act towards one another and love one another will make a profound difference to us personally and collectively. This assertion that we human beings are collectively made in the image of God is the more remarkable because God was not permitted to be imaged in any other way.

**Hymn: God is love**

God is love, let heav’n adore him;

God is love, let earth rejoice

Let creation sing before him,

And exult him with one voice.

God, who laid the earth’s foundation,

He who spread the heavens above,

And who breathes through all creation

God is love, eternal love.

God is love, and gently enfolding

All the world in one embrace,

With unfailing grasp is holding

Every child of every race.

And when human hearts are breaking

Under sorrow’s iron rod,

Then they find that selfsame aching

Deep within the heart of God.

God is love, and, though with blindness

Sin afflicts our human hearts,

God’s eternal lovingkindness

Holding, guiding, grace imparts.

Sin and death and hell shall never

O’er us final triumph gain;

God is love, so love for ever

O’er the universe must reign.

1. See also John 14:6-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)