

Perhaps one of the most overworked words in English is the word love. It is used to say how much we care for people, how much we adore our brand new wash machine, people call you love as they ask what do you want at a restaurant, etc. Love is a word we banter around assuming everyone understands what it means to us.

This month we are reviewing the meaning of Advent concentrating on four words: hope, peace, love and joy. Our four Advent candles highlight each week one of these words as we prepare for the celebration of the birth of the Son of God.

I want to review very briefly the use of the word love in the Old Testament and then the New Testament as we consider the meaning of love and God's love for us as shown in the birth of the Christ child.

Love in the Old Testament is the basic character of the relationship between persons, a relationship with the qualities of devotion, loyalty, intimate knowledge and responsibility. It is not simply an emotion but is a total quality of relationship. Love is the force that both initiates and maintains relationships, be it among persons or between God and men and women.

Love is a pervasive quality in human relationships for the Old Testament. It takes many forms: the sexual, quite possibly the romantic, the love within families and within the bonds of kinship, the love of friendship and of human covenant. In short, the rightly ordered human relationship is one of mutuality in love. The whole range of human relationships is viewed in the Old Testament as directed and determined by love. This love is no abstract emotion, but the concrete acts of love and loyalty and respect which go to the maintenance of human society.

We need to examine also the view of divine love in the Old Testament. God's love is not viewed as emotional. Rather divine love is his redeeming activity and interest in human history. To call this love is to recognize that this redeeming activity in human history produces the relationship of persons between men and women and God. Love is mentioned so many times in the Old Testament that it has to be seen as an active characteristic of God. The love of God manifests itself most strongly in Israel's history and his continuing willingness to stick with his people in spite of their wanderings away from him on a regular basis.

The covenantal love, that agreement between God and his people, is primary in the divine-human relationship. Men and women are to love God. However, this love for God is derived from God's earliest establishment of covenantal relationship with his creation. It is because God loves us first that the faithful are urged to love God in grateful response. The great commandment: "You shall love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5), sets forth the most profound response to God's oneness, his uniqueness, and his sole claim to men and women's devotion.

The outcome for Israel of these beliefs that God first loved them was to respond willingly and gratefully to God in loving, thankful worship. And just as love for man is a key ethical outlook, so love for God provides the most profound impulse to responsible life or living. In other words we love one another because God first loved us. Thus we read that those who love God are those who attempt to follow his commandments.

As we move into the New Testament, the use of love language is less common than one would expect. The general impressions of what Jesus had to teach us about God must surely be that of an infinite love, invincible in resources, altogether perfect. The two great commandments of “Love the lord your GodLove your neighbour as yourself” depend on the prior assumption that God is, in fact, loveable and loving. Jesus reminded Jewish leaders that God preferred loving kindness shown towards friends and strangers to a sacrificial cult of worship.

Perhaps the greatest change in our picture of God made by Jesus was to emphasize that God was the father. We read often of Jesus using the intimate word Abba or father, implying a deep fellowship of understanding and affection as well as obedience.

God, said Jesus, cares for his creatures and for mankind: he clothes the grass and feeds the ravens; he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust; the cheapest sparrow does not die without God’s remembrance, and the very hairs of our heads are all numbered. These words are not just quaint, poetic hyperbole so much as they are a tender declaration of the universal and intimate character of the divine love as Jesus himself knew it. Man is dependent; God is independent.

Three words best describe what this love Jesus speaks to us about: love is patient, love is merciful, love is generous. The consequent duty of men and women as the children of such a God is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to never let money or materialism or self-interest usurp God’s place in our lives.

You might recall that in the gospels, we see that even religion may get in the way of genuine love, and this was the worst condemnation of the Pharisees and other opponents of Jesus. Be careful, Jesus would say, that nothing takes the place of your love for God and your love for one another. Jesus was not against people’s devotion to the acts of worship of God, but he warned these should not be seen as substitutes for care, respect and concern for our fellow man.

We believe that love has been most starkly and clearly revealed for all of us at the Cross, and in the character of Jesus Christ. Paul writes in Romans 5:8: “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” “Christ died for us” means that Jesus chose to die and did this to redeem us; that somehow in him were concentrated the horror, the anguish and pain of human guilt. Because the Cross stands for victory over sin and evil, love is seen as victorious and most powerful. This great love played out in the death and resurrection of Jesus, is our clear indicator of divine providence and love. We know that God’s care is constantly exercised for the good of mankind and is everlasting.

St. Paul, the great church builder, always spoke of God as a loving Power in the Holy Spirit, who knits the faithful into a communion, a congregation family, a community of believers. God's presence and love was the building block of the worshipping congregation.

The writer of First John made a great contribution to Christian theology in chapter 4, verse 8 when he simply and profoundly states these three words: "God is love". All that is wondrous and profound in love is wrapped up in God himself. In Jesus, love had reached down from God to men and women that they might rise up to enjoy life in God forever.

Our first reading this morning was from Isaiah 61. Isaiah speaks of the Spirit of the Lord upon him and what it requires him to do. He speaks of being anointed by God to bring good tidings to the afflicted; to bind up the brokenhearted and to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort all who mourn and to energize the people to once again rise up, rebuild and know God is there.

This sense in Isaiah of the life of care for others he was being led to follow is the life we are all called upon to live out each day. As with God, we should love justice and hate injustice. Isaiah concludes today's passage by saying: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness."

God's great love for us, particularly as we have seen it in Jesus Christ, causes us to respond with all we have in worship and service to others. We know from personal experience how love can completely transform us, can energize us and can cause us to do more than we ever believed possible.

Our last reading was the Song of Mary found in Luke's version of the birth story. In this song, Mary expresses her overwhelming sense of wonder that God had chosen her, the lowliest of handmaidens, to be the mother of the messiah. He who is the mighty God, the all powerful who scatters armies and removes kings from their thrones, it was he who had gently touched Mary in a loving way. Mary had no idea where all this was leading her but she did know that God's choice of her for this event filled her with rejoicing and praise.

Love permeates the whole of the Christmas story. Love of God for his people; adoration of the angels excited by this holy birth; Mary and Joseph's willingness to trust God as they played out their part; the excitement of the shepherds who were society's lowliest persons and the journey of the three wise men to see for themselves this cosmic event and to pay tribute to it.

The Advent of Love, as God comes into history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a young mother and a humble man.

The love of God which knows no bounds and which is reliable and constant is a great gift. This has been known throughout the history of the Hebrews and later the Christians and is known by us today.

It is this love which became wrapped up in the form of a small baby born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. This is what we celebrate as we prepare for Christmas – love.

Thanks be to God for this great gift of Jesus and all he represents in a hurting and needy world. Amen

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