

## Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2021: Reflection – ‘TRUE LOVE’ (John 15:9-17, Phil 2:5-11)

So this Sunday is Valentine’s Day – something which may fill some of you with hope, and maybe others with dread or disappointment. What *is* true is that we Brits do make a lot of Valentine’s Day traditionally. Last year we spent £1.45 billion pounds on it, just in the UK alone – or an average of £35 per adult in a relationship. And if memory serves me correctly, £35 usually buys you about 3 red roses.

What Valentine’s Day’s does do is highlight the fundamental question: **what is love?** In popular culture – especially around Valentine’s Day – love is generally talked about as a feeling, indeed it’s something we have to ‘feel’ to be called love. But is that right? (PAUSE)

In Jesus’ time, the Greeks (the dominant culture and language of the time) had 3 different words for love: *eros* = sexual love; *philia* = friendship or liking kind of love; *storge* = family affection. Doing 3 times better than us – but interestingly, early Christians decided to invent a new word for love – agape, word used in this passage. (Bear in mind that Jesus would have spoken in Aramaic, so when John is recalling this conversation years later and putting what Jesus said into Greek, it’s really important what word he chooses to use – and he doesn’t use any of the usual 3 words, he uses this brand new word ‘agape’.)

**Agape means the giving of self to others** – it’s basically a revolution in our understanding of love. And, here, Jesus says to his disciples: ‘Love each other – agape each other, as I have agape’d you.’

So Jesus’ own life – seen supremely on the cross (something we’ll commemorate shortly), but also throughout his time on earth – becomes not just the definition of love, but the pattern of how we relate to each other. Jesus loves *us* by serving us selflessly – and we too are to love *others* with the same selfless service. As my dad said at our wedding: ‘Love isn’t give and take: it’s give, and give, and forgive, and give some more.’

So true love, at its root, isn’t really a feeling word: it’s a *doing* word. It’s behaviour. As Jesus says: If you love me, you’ll keep my commands – or you might paraphrase that as ‘you’ll live like I do.’ **This, Jesus says, is how we abide in his love. And as we abide, so we find joy.**

So what does all this mean? I wanted to go back to basics today, to look at one of the most foundational of all words – what is true love? And in this passage we learn, very simply:

**First, love is initiated by God – ‘I have loved you,’ God says.** That’s a message that none of us can ever grow tired of. I’m fed up of lockdown – I imagine you all are too. I’m tired of every day looking the same, of sitting in front of a screen, of not seeing people in the flesh and all the rest of it. But sometimes it’s good to remember: God loves you today as much as he did yesterday, and as much as he will tomorrow. Nothing you do can make God love you more, and nothing you can do can make God love you less. Abide in my love, Jesus says, and you will be my friend.

Jesus is calling us today to be his friends. Not just his servants, but his friends. In all the work you do with God and for God you don't just get to serve God, you get to *partner* with him. I read someone this week describe the idea of us partnering with God as being like a parent and child digging a hole – the parent has a massive spade, and the child a little plastic one. And the child takes lots of breaks and gets distracted – but at the end of the day the parent looks lovingly at the child and says: isn't it great that we dug this hole together?

God loves you, and he takes so much joy at what each of us is doing with our little plastic spades – and may that thought bring you joy today, as Jesus intended. (PAUSE)

**Second, and finally – we are called to love like Jesus.** That's not always very exciting. I remember a brilliant talk by Gary Haugen, director of the International Justice Mission, which sounds like a very glamorous kind of charity, describing just how much work it took to bring a slave owner to justice. Hundreds of hours of mostly boring prep work and paperwork, dotting all the i's and crossing the t's. And he quoted an old Peter Gabriel song – 'The book of love is long and boring – but I love it when you sing it to me.'

I don't know what you think of your life at present: you may think some of it a bit dull – but it's a good reminder today to see the sacrifices you're making as an act of love – of selfless giving, to God and others. And maybe God is saying to some of you today: you know what, it might be long and boring at the moment, but I love it when you sing it to me.

So as I close, I don't want to be a killjoy about Valentine's Day – enjoy it if you can. Ignore my bah-humbug'ry.! But let's be inspired again by Jesus words' on true love:

*'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you – now remain in my love... I've told you this so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.'* Amen.