
1 John 4: 7-21 – Love won another

1. Love begins with God and is the central truth of Christian faith, for God is love. It is a two-way relationship for us though. It is only by knowing the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ that we can understand what love is. But it is then only by us loving that we learn to know God's for real & personally, not just as an abstract proposition. .
2. Love is *the* controlling element in Christian faith. Over the years, religious people have put many things above this & that leads to an unlovely distorted faith. We can make moral purity what is most important and that leads to an attitude of self-righteousness & judgementalism. At times, correct doctrine has been the controlling factor, & that has led to harshness, division and exclusion. Moral integrity & doctrinal truth are good & important but love, as seen in Jesus Christ, must be the controlling factor.
3. Human love is not an optional extra but must be our response to God's love, which came first. St. Paul affirms that it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). He loved us first (v. 10) and it is His love that melts our hardness of heart. Quote 2 Corinthians 5:14: *for God's love compels us...* . Many years ago, a church had a mission and used a nice play on words for its slogan, "Love won another." Because in loving, we reflect and show the nature of God in Christ.
4. John also writes *that perfect love drives out fear.* (v. 19) **Not our perfect love but the perfect love of God in Jesus** that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8a . A lot of religion has been dominated by fear & over the centuries fear has been used to control & dominate people. The relationship we have with God *in Christ* has a different quality & character from anything else we have known before. In human terms, I don't fear those I love. I fear letting them down & that is the nature of the relationship the Christian has with God. We know that we are accepted as we are, that we might become different, we don't have to prove ourselves or fear losing God's love for us. He already knows the truth about us and it didn't put Him off!

A new commandment I give unto you. Let there be love shared among us

Reflection 2 Grafted into the True Vine

These verses are a counter-balance to what we have reflected on in 1 John 4. There can be a danger of thinking that, if it is all about love, then we can dismiss the pious religious stuff of faith & just love.

I am not an adventurous or committed gardener, but I gather that around Jerez de la Frontera in Spain, all the vines used to grow the grapes for sherry are grafted. The vine is grafted onto a parent stem, which makes them less susceptible to disease & therefore healthier & establishes them quickly. A good image for Christ *the true vine* (John 1:1,5) This passage reminds us of the central importance of grafting into the vine. & of the role of prayer and worship is looking after that.

It includes an element of judgment too –there is pruning required but that need not be a frightening thing, but rather something that leads to more fruitfulness. “Jesus says, **“Apart from me you can do nothing” (5b)** - nothing of value that will last. Are we willing to be pruned by God the Father? For unless we are open to bearing fruit, we invite disaster. The unfruitful branches are cut off & thrown out to make the vine stronger.

3 Lessons for today - and for our tomorrows:

1. We live in a world which seems to live by “*justification by works*”. We boast of all the stress we live with & may measure our worth by how busy we are. Ministers can be the worst as we may quietly pride ourselves as to how many funerals we have conducted or how long it is since we have had proper day off. As someone who has had a driven, some would say unhealthily workaholic attitude & for past 43 years, has seen my life as a bonus to be used well for Christ, the last year has helped me rest / abide more in Christ.

The result of frantic busyness is that people become more & more stressed, the branch is further away from the vine & so produces more leaves but not always much fruit. Local churches do it too. We like to boast of how busy we are & how much we do, yet the most fruitful thing a person can do is to remain close to the vine. The busier we get, the less time we may find for prayer & the less fruitful we become. **We are to depend on Christ and not the other way round.** Time spent in prayer, worship & bible study is not wasted but the most fruitful thing we can do. There is no point being frantically busy if we are doing the wrong things. We all then need to take time to graft into the vine, discover His will & then you will be more fruitful.

2. Notice v. 5 says, *you are the branches* – *you* is plural. Perhaps if we are stressed out by all we are doing, it is because we are doing the role of other branches. There is one vine but many branches. We often say, “*If you want something down, ask a busy person.*” There is an element of truth in that, but in church, we should not be a bunch of “Lone Rangers” or “Superheroes”, watched by spectators stuck in their seats, but a team where all play a part, as far as they are able, and all have a part to play. There must be a place for all the branches to bear fruit. The pruning by the gardener is not necessarily about punishment, but may be an act of kindness, to cut us back a little to allow others to flourish.
3. vv. 10-11: It is no coincidence that John writes about joy and love. If we are far from the vine and becoming stressed out, then the first casualties are joy and love. We lose all joy in our living if we are too worn out to enjoy anything. We lose love for the task we once enjoyed; we lose love for those we are called to serve because we feel put upon and we feel that they are not doing their bit as branches, but leaving it all to us. We may even lose our love for God, whom we believe is calling us to do all this frantic activity. So let’s all graft into the vine and let His life flow through us to release us from that burden and restore our love and joy.