

**God is Love... But What is Love?**  
**1 John 4:7-21 and John 15:9-17**

We see in these two passages the 'high' theology revealed to St John. Through his conversations with Christ - who considered him to be the 'beloved disciple' - and the unfolding revelation of the Holy Spirit, God revealed to John things that were not as clear to the other disciples.

What God revealed to John was this. That the Holy Spirit has been given to anyone who believes in Christ, and unites the believer to both Christ and the Father and anyone else who had faith. Through the Holy Spirit, we have *koinonia* (communion or fellowship) with God and with each other.

While that is the spiritual side of the situation, this spiritual reality for John is most evident in the love we have for God and have each other. The love in question is of a very particular kind, however. It is not romantic or sexual love (Greek *eros*) or love based on friendship or similar qualities (Greek *philia*) but self-sacrificial love, which John uses the word *agape* to describe. This kind of love has a divine origin and nature for John, and is what it feels like when we are spiritually united with God and each other.

While this is similar to other kinds of altruistic love (e.g. the love that a parent has for their child) John would not see that as true *agape* love, as it is based on the similarity and natural connection between parent and child. True *agape* love is expressed in Jesus Christ dying for his enemies, for people like us who have broken God's laws and treated ourselves and each other badly. For that reason, true *agape* love is seen when people are loving and kind and generous with those they have nothing in common with or who they dislike.

That may sound unappealing, but without that kind of love, our war-torn, selfish and broken world will never heal or get better. That fear work of reconciliation began in Christ and continues in the Church, which unites people of every background, race, personality and politics. That is the Church we are called to be in Linlithgow and Avon Valley.

1 John 4:7-21

**7** Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. **8** Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. **9** God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. **10** In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. **11** Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

**13** By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. **14** And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. **15** God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. **16** So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. **17** Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. **18** There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. **19** We love because he first loved us. **20** Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. **21** The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

1. What is the most loving relationship you have ever had? What made it special?
2. How does John think we see and experience God's love for us?
3. 'No one has ever seen God...' In what way does John think love provides 'evidence' for God?

John 15:9-17

**9** As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. **10** If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. **11** I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

**12** 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. **13** No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command you. **15** I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. **16** You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. **17** I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

4. What do you think it means to 'abide' in Christ? What does 'abide' mean here?
5. What do you think the relationship is between abiding in Christ and 'bearing fruit'? What kind of fruit is Jesus talking about?
6. Activity: by yourself, write down in one column some of the people in your life you love best. Then, in another column, write down the people who you struggle most with (you can have the same people in both columns!). Take some time to think and pray through how your feelings differ towards these two columns. Then, draw a cross with its cross bar encompassing both groups and its longer beam reaching above and below it. Take some time to reflect on how Christ lived, died and rose again for all of these people. How might that help you change your mind and heart about the people you struggle with?