

1 John 4:7-12 - 14th after Pentecost [21.8.2016]

Love - before all else!

⁷ Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ But anyone who does not love does not know God - for God is love.

⁹ God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. ¹⁰ This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

¹¹ Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. ¹² No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love has been brought to full expression through us. [NLT]

It is sometimes said, that people become teachers, because they are unable to 'do' what their profession requires. Now this may at times seem to be true, when tennis players or musicians become coaches or music teachers, because they are unable to achieve the top level in their field. Yet, being a teacher requires as much talent, dedication and hard work as becoming a professional in whatever branch that may be.

Teaching, and not doing - that does not make sense. A tennis coach must be able to play tennis to a certain level to be able to coach. A music teacher must have a level of proficiency to be able to teach music.

Teaching, and not doing - even if that does not make sense, is that not a danger for us as Christians? - and not only as it was the case of the teacher of the law in the Gospel reading today (Luke 10:25-37), who knew the theory, but did not know what love means. We set great store by the teachings we have - but what purpose do these teachings have, if they are not put into practise? That is something we are reminded of today - and not only in this passage.

John highlights for all of us, who are content to rest on the fact that we have all the teachings we need, that it must be a case of

Love - before all else!

Love as the centre of who we are, and what we do - the reason is quite simple:

We are all here because of love - the love of God. This love has made it possible for us to be members of the church - to once again be in a relationship with God. Because that is what it is all about - being members of the church of Christ is not just about knowing certain things about God. God calls us into a relationship with himself - that is the purpose he made us for, and that is what he once again gives us.

The amazing thing about God and his love is that he did not simply walk away from us and abandon us to our fate, once we turned away from him. When the people he had made - the crown of his creation - turned away from him, he set into motion his plan to bring them - us - back to himself. God did not wait until we would be worthy of his love - that wait would never end!

Instead, in his love God set out to win us back. John writes here: **God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.**

God's love is not so much a feeling, but a sacrificing himself and his Son for us. It was this sacrificial love which led Jesus to become man and to lead a life in which he would give himself for us in love.

This is real love - not taking what he could get, but giving what he could not expect to receive back from us. We read in John 13 how Jesus demonstrates a further aspect of this love when he performs the service no one else wanted to do as he bent down to wash the feet of his disciples. Then he concludes the 'demonstration' by giving his followers a new commandment, and the means by which we are to be recognised when he said: ... **I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.**" (John 13:34-35)

Love - before all else! - we acknowledge that when we say that the central message of the Bible is wrapped up in the verse John 3:16: **"For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."**

Yet, we are not just to teach about this love - about all God did. We are to receive this love into our lives - that means living in a relationship with him. As with all relationships there is a measure of risk involved. It is true that we sometimes try to regulate relationships with a set of rules, e.g. the relationship between a teacher and pupil - but if the pupil is only intent on following the rules, if he/she only practises because they are afraid of being punished if they don't, they will never truly achieve what they might.

Our relationship with God can not simply be bound up in certain rules of what to do, and what not - then we would only do things, because we are afraid of being punished otherwise. God calls us into a relationship with himself to free us from the fear of punishment. And yet, so often people believe that God is punishing them for something they did - or failed to do. That is something which needs to be totally deleted from the hard-drive of our memory, because God does not treat us as we deserve. His love gives us so much more than we could ever hope for.

We need to understand that there is no one 'correct way' of worshipping God and praying to him - and if you don't do it like that, you will be punished. God has made us all differently - and that also applies to the way in which we come to him with our praise and worship. But one thing applies to all of us: we are to **continue to love one another**.

What is quite amazing from what John writes here, is that God becomes visible in our world and to the people around us, when we are so changed by his love, that we are prepared to do what nobody else wants to do. Of course we can't go around washing peoples' feet the whole time - but because of the love they have received from God, people have set out to do things for others. That does not always mean doing some great deeds - although there are those who have started great charitable works.

But for each of us it may simply be seeing that someone in our congregation is going through a difficult time, and deciding to cook some meals for them. That may be seeing how lonely a person is, and inviting them for a cup of coffee or tea - or having a meal with them.

Love is not bound up in rules - it is not about being able to check off a box, and think that you have now done your bit, and now it's time for others to do theirs. That is an option that does not apply in the church of Christ!

When we begin to take each other seriously, as God has taken us seriously; if we see each other as God has seen us, if we are not driven simply by what I want and by satisfying my desires - then we give the world around us a look into 'heaven', as God's **love has been brought to full expression through us**.

This is real love - not some fuzzy feeling but something very specific. Real love is not just taking, but allowing the love we have received to shine through us, as we love one another with God's love. Real love means, that who we want to be, is not what makes us tick, but who God has called us to be, as his love changes our lives - and reaches out into the lives of others.

This is love - that we teach about all God has given us, but then that God is part of all we do, so that all we do reflects his presence in our world.