

Let us pray: Where the River of your love flows, Lord, everything will live. Teach us how to live together and love each other as we learn more about what it means to be your people in this place. Amen.

I want to speak about love today.

Can you tell me about love? Complete the sentence that starts: Love.... Or has the word 'love' in it?

Never ends

Stronger than death

Makes the world go round

What about: God so loved the world...?

Jesus said to his disciples: *Love one another. A new commandment. As I have loved you, show the same love to one another. Then they'll all know you belong to me!*

And what happens in the fledgling church as she begins to spread her wings? Scandal! Shock! Peter had spent time with Gentiles in their home, had eaten with them. Dreadful!

The Apostles and Jerusalem Church worthies demanded an explanation.

So Peter did explain...explained his vision and God's direction and the Lord's gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on Gentile believers.

God's vision for his church was bigger, wider, more filled with grace than the young Jerusalem Church could ever have imagined. And what did those Christ-followers do next? They praised God and rejoiced at this new understanding of His will.

Do we build walls of judgement where no walls should be? Do we restrict our faith lives to church moments, Sundays, Life Groups, the 'in crowd' and forget that actually there is a much bigger picture the Lord wants us to grasp?

I read recently this question about Christian faith: 'If it isn't about the whole of life, what is it about?'

If our Christian hope, our love in Christ, through Christ, doesn't extend outside the walls of our Church, is confined to the body of our Church family and friends then we're really missing God's vision for His Church and limiting possibility.

Our love 'for one another' must be like the love of Christ: reaching out to the needy, the 'ritually unclean', the hopeless and helpless.

We need to remember Jesus' talk about the Good Samaritan when we're trying to decide who our neighbour is and who needs to be on the receiving end of God's transformative love.

Jesus' love was never just about having kindly thoughts and a warm fuzzy feeling towards folks. It was about getting down and dirty with the outcasts, travelling dusty roads with aching feet to show his love in action. Every day. Making the most of every opportunity to show God's love and Grace at work.

Above all, Jesus' love was incredibly sacrificial.

So we need to catch and obey God's far-reaching vision of grace. We need to hear his command to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. That's loving one another. It takes all sorts to do this. All of us to all who have never heard. And it's the order of the day, of the week, of the millennium.

But of course we're not being asked to rush off to the far flung mission field, because we already live right there...in the mission field. We work there. We shop there. We chat there.

For each and every one of us our sphere of Christian loving and living is all around us, all the time.

It's about the whole of life, because God enters into the whole of life with us. Good and bad. Serious and trivial. In both joy and sorrow. Jesus touched the leper, wept at Lazarus' grave, celebrated at the wedding at Cana, prayed in the dark-before-dawn, spent time with friends and family, told stories, criticised religious hypocrisy, fed the hungry, calmed the storm, forgave those who killed him. At twelve years old he'd said, in astonished tones to his frantic parents: *where else should I be but in my Father's house?*

What else should he be at, but doing His Father's work? And that was everything he did, with everyone he met.

Sometimes, we may fall into the trap of forgetting that we all have our everyday, ordinary lives, not just Sunday lives.

Ordinary lives with all that comes with living in a fraught 21st century: rocketing bills, a struggling health service, the demands of family and shocking news bulletins, stress-full jobs making for stress-filled lives.

Sometimes it's hard to think of each other's lives outside a Church context. But that is exactly what we have to do.

If our faith has to have any relevance or integrity, we must be aware of and supportive of each other's 24/7 lives.

Try asking the question after the service: what's this week looking like for you? Can I pray for you at all?

Last week we had the privilege of hearing from Viktoria about her journey with her children from Ukraine. We prayed for her and as we prayed I pointed out that Jesus on the Cross in the window over the altar at St Luke's has his arms open wide: in sacrifice, but also in welcome.

Jesus, our risen Lord, constantly calls us: *Come to me, all you who are weary or heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Come to me. Follow me. Do what I do. Love as I have loved you.*

Arms open wide in welcome...as we must do.

Open hearts....to love the unlovely.

Open minds....to learn new things, and to catch God's wider, bigger vision.

Open homes....to offer hospitality and shelter.

Open hopes...expecting God to make a way where there seems to be no way...that's one of the things prayer is for!

Open doors in our lives....no compartmentalising our faith lives from the rest of our daily living at work, at home, at play.

Does the world still need Good News? Do we still need to tell about the well-spring of hope and joy in our hearts and that it's source is Jesus? Do we need to model forgiveness and courage and grace?

This world is broken and dark and frightened. War, hunger, disaster and disease are the daily experience of millions around this hurting planet. So let's pray. Let's work, together, in our own particular mission fields, proclaiming God's good news in every action, every beat of our hearts, every breath of our being.

Are we sad? Bereaved? Filled with pain and darkness of the soul? Let us walk that hard way with you as Jesus walks the Valley of the Shadow with you. There will be light and a new tomorrow. Promise.

For love never ends. God's love is stronger than death. He will never let us go.

But as always, the Lord issues a challenge to each of us: *love one another. As I have loved, so you all, my dear children, my followers, my disciples, must love.*

Let's catch HIS vision of a faith that is 24/7. Of a way of walking the Christian walk from one week's beginning to the next, wherever we are, whatever we may be doing. And watch. Loving one another, telling the good news of Jesus' love will make all the difference in the world.

What's next week looking like for you? Can I pray for you?

Amen.