

Loved by God

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Readings:

Isaiah 43: 1 – 7

Psalm 21

Luke 3: 15 – 22

Loved by God - isn't that a great feeling knowing that we are all loved by God? But what does 'loved by God' actually mean and what doesn't it mean? These are the issues we will look at today.

But first of all what do we mean by 'love' because the word can be, and is, used in so many ways it must be the one of the most overused and misused words in the English language.

As well as expressing our feeling for fellow beings it tends to be used in a great deal of other inappropriate ways. So any suggestions on inappropriate ways we use the word 'love'?

E.g. people talk of loving sports, hobbies or other pastimes, drink or food, holiday destinations, pets, TV programmes, singers, film stars, sports stars, sports teams, the list is almost endless.

Love is defined in the dictionary as:

- Feel affection for
- Adore
- Worship
- Be in love with
- Be devoted to
- Care for
- Find irresistible
- Be keen on

But even if we restrict love to mean 'feeling affection for fellow beings' there are still many levels of meaning. E.G: Our love for our spouse is quite different to our love for our brothers or sisters, or our parents or even our children or grandchildren. And again it is a different kind of love when people talk of 'loving' a pop or a sports star.

So how do we show our love for one another? There is the old adage 'Actions speak louder than words' and this is particularly true when it comes to saying 'I love

you'. The words on their own are meaningless if they are not backed up by appropriate actions.

The best example is within a marriage which could not survive long if the words 'I love you' were nothing other than words. In both marriages and families there has to be:

- Trust
- Caring for each other and a willingness to make personal sacrifices for the good of both
- Sharing and working together
- Listening to each other
- Devotion to each other
- A willingness to work together
- A willingness to ask for forgiveness as well as forgive.

At times it can be difficult to love those close to us, because they can do or say things that hurt us or put our love under strain. How much more difficult is it then to love those around us as Jesus commands?

But it is a sad fact of life that the course of love rarely runs true and we will always meet problems – resolving these and forgiving one another is a sign of true love.

Unfortunately this is not always possible and love or relationships with close friends breaks down. This can result in a feeling of hurt and being let down which in turn can lead to bitterness, resentment and sometimes permanent breakdown in a relationship.

Obviously this is most serious within families especially if it results in the breakup of families or married couples divorcing. Unfortunately this is far more common than it ought to be and in 2007, the last year for which full figures are available show that although divorce rates were the lowest for 26 years in England and Wales there were still:

- 128,534 couples divorced
- 1 in 5 had been previously divorced
- In families divorcing there were 117,193 children under the age of 16, and of these 50,076 were under 11 years old of whom 23,625 were under 5!

Knowing how we feel at the breakdown in relationships can you imagine how God feels?? In saying 'I love you' we may be able to fool those we are speaking to but we cannot fool God. God knows our true feelings and our innermost thoughts; he knows we will let him down – but he still loves us! God will always love us and that is an important aspect of being loved by God!

God created a perfect world and as a sign of his love for mankind he put them in charge of his creation.

But then the serpent tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and sin entered the perfect world God had created and things have never been the same since.

Mankind broke the love and trust of God. Time and time again God's chosen people continued their sinful ways and ignored God's will. Can you imagine our reaction if our loved ones behaved like this to us! Most probably we would give up on them, wash our hands of them never own them again!

But what did God do? Well as a sign of his love for mankind he kept forgiving his people, not only that but he made fresh covenants (agreements) with Abraham, with Israel (through Moses) and with David.

In our worldly lives covenants are only binding if both parties to the agreement comply with the terms – but with God's covenants God strictly adheres to the terms of his agreement even knowing that mankind has wilfully failed to keep its side of the bargain (and will continue to do so).

In addition God's covenants become progressively richer in promise until the coming of Christ ushers in the 'new covenant'. For as a sign of his never-ending love for us God did much more than just say he loves us, he showed his love in action when he sent his only Son Jesus to save us from our sins.

Our reading from Luke's Gospel describes John preparing the way for Christ and baptising people on the basis of repentance from sin. There was therefore no reason for Jesus to be baptised for he was the Son of God as well as a sinless man.

But he accepted baptism in obedient service to the Father, and God showed his approval in two ways:

- The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove, and
- A voice from heaven said "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3: 22)

In both a visible and audible way God was confirming that Jesus was his Son, the long awaited Messiah. This was God confirming his love for us!

And Jesus loved us so much that he willingly endured pain, humiliation and finally gave his life on the cross in order to save us. That is sign of the depth of God's love for us, love in action.

Earlier I showed a slide of the signs of our love for one another – so going back to them we can see how these are also signs of God's love for us.

- Trust- If we ask, Jesus will be at our side helping us as we work for God
- Caring for each other and a willingness to make personal sacrifices - Jesus put our needs before his own and took that hard and painful path to the cross
- Sharing and working together - Jesus cared for everyone especially those rejected by society, the poor, the sick, the disabled

- Listening to each other - Jesus listen to our prayers
- Devotion to each other - Jesus will work with us to strengthen our faith
- A willingness to work together - God has given everyone of us gifts to use for the benefit of others – these may be spiritual or practical gifts
- A willingness to ask for forgiveness as well as forgive – If we repent God will forgive our sins, whatever they are.

But what greater sign of God's love for us can there be than him sending his only son to die on the cross to save us from our sins? Not because we loved him or deserved it but because we are loved by God!

Despite these signs from God people still want something tangible, visual, and "real" before they believe. Jesus did healings and other miracles, and God raised Jesus from the dead and yet people still doubted and still do to this day!

So when we say we love Jesus do we mean it and, if so, how do we show that love in our lives? Remember just before Jesus was arrested Peter professed that he would not leave Him and yet before the cock crowed three times he had denied even knowing Jesus, let alone being a friend who loved him!

When Peter met up with the resurrected Jesus , three times Jesus asked him 'Peter, do you love me?' and three times Peter responded 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!'

Following this encounter with Jesus Peter was transformed he now genuinely loved Jesus, he not only thought it but now was prepared to publicly and unashamedly admit that love. He was now prepared to give his all, even his life as proof of that.

And the difference between the two Peters? Love in action! God showed his love for Peter and he responded. Before Jesus' betrayal Peter may have thought and said he loved Jesus but it was a love that had restrictions - he wasn't prepared to even risk his life for Jesus let alone give his life for that love, life meant too much to him.

It is easy for us to say that we love Jesus but are they just words as Peter's were before he met the resurrected Lord? If they are more than just words how do we show that love in our everyday lives? How do we reciprocate God's love for us?

Even in the closest of loving relationships the love we show or experience is as nothing when compared with God's love for us. But being loved by God does not mean we are immune to the normal trials and tribulations of this earthly world.

Marriage is a life-changing event, as every married person will confirm, you simply cannot continue living your lives as you did before marriage. There will be trials and tribulations and it needs both parties to work together through these

difficulties for marriage to work. It is also an ongoing process of learning from each other.

Loving Jesus is exactly the same we cannot say we love Jesus if we are not prepared to change our lifestyles. We cannot love Jesus and continue to live a life that is not in total harmony with God's way. We cannot love Jesus if we are not prepared to listen to him and learn day by day and we cannot love Jesus if we are not prepared to respond to his love for us. There will be trials and tribulations – Jesus warned his disciples that would be the case.

God loved his Son and yet he was willing to give him up for our sakes, to watch him suffer humiliation, pain and the ignominy of that death on the cross. God could at any time have brought to an end that suffering and take his Son back into his loving arms.

But if he did that then his plan to save mankind would be thwarted.

- Yes, it hurt to see his Son suffer
- Yes, it hurt to know that he could stop it
- Yes, it hurt to abandon his Son
- But, thankfully, it hurt him **even more** to abandon mankind.

It hurt him **even more** to abandon mankind. Jesus and God had to endure all that suffering and hurt because there really was no other way to save us from our sins. That is the measure of just how much we are loved by God!