

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Love in Action

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The second reading which Mary Ellen brought to us tonight might not be an obvious one for a Watchnight Service. John writes:

Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God.

John goes on to argue the well known case that **GOD IS LOVE** and that

His love was disclosed to us in this, that he sent his only Son into the world to bring us life.

Well, we have just sung a simpler version of that theological statement in the carol "Love came down at Christmas" Love is, or should be, at the heart of the Christian Christmas. It is there at the heart of the Gospel which Jesus brought, and is still at the heart of the Church's teaching today. Christmas is God's love in action. He doesn't just regard us lovingly: he does something about it.

However, we know that, simple though this concept of loving one another is, it is one of the most difficult to put into practice. Especially difficult is the great command of our Lord that we "Love our Enemies" - it's hard enough loving our friends and relations sometimes.

Tonight I would like to spend a few minutes sharing with you some thoughts about love, and especially love in action.

Part of our problem is that we use the word "love" for a multitude of purposes. We use it casually - "I love that hat" and unthinkingly - "Thanks - love to come". We use it as an exaggeration of reality - "I love Lady Gaga: I love watching Shinty: I love a good book" and so on, when we really mean I like very much, or even I like at this moment.

The Greek of the New Testament on the other hand had a number of different words, all of which we translate as "love".

Firstly, perhaps most easily understood, is "**EROS**" - the physical feeling between two people. We in the Christian Church believe that this love is as much "from God" as any other form of love. That is what we mean by the sanctity of marriage - holy matrimony.

The second Greek word for love is "**STORGE**". This is the love bond which binds together the parent and child. It is a deep personal affection: it is the tie of kinship, which again can be quite physical in its manifestation. It is the heart of the family. This love is one which we have all experienced both as children and as adults. It is a joyous gift of God, which we treasure. When it is absent within a family, it can cause deep pain and sorrow.

But let us face facts. We no longer live in a world of close-knit families. Our kin are scattered over the globe. At the same time we live in a Global Village - where events in Africa or South America are as much part of our daily diet of "round the table" chatter as the events of our children at school. Are we in danger of losing "STORGE" unless we change our attitudes and embrace new ideas? We cannot ever hope to have a kinship relationship with the whole world - whatever our Lord said about brotherhood. But in the absence of large

close-knit kin groups to generate STORGE, could we not expand our kinship bonds a little to embrace more of the needy, the homeless, and the unloved - not as an act of charity but as part of our extended family group – our love in action.

When Jesus told us to “love our neighbour” the word the Gospel writers used was “**PHILIA**”. This is the most common biblical term for love. It transcends both sex and kinship, to express the deepest kind of love between human beings. This is St Paul’s “love” or “charity” of Corinthians 13, which has neither envy or fear or any of the other baser emotions: which is patient and kind and keeps no score of wrongs. It is the love, says Paul, which will never come to an end.

This is the heart of the Gospel. This is the ideal which we aspire to as Christians. This is part of the great gift which is given to us in the Stable at Bethlehem. We want to accept it: we strive to grasp it. But we all know that that is easier said than done. This is not entirely our fault. For **PHILIA**, like the two loves we have already discussed, implies deep emotional feelings, deep love from the heart. We cannot always control or even understand our emotions. Loves like these often come unbidden - we cannot help ourselves. We “fall” in love: go “head over heels”: phrases like that are used to express the lack of control we feel about these emotions. The Scriptures and the other great writings of our faith help us to reach some sort of understanding, but love is not an easy thing.

“Love your enemies” That surely is the most difficult command Christ gave to us. If we left this purely to our emotions, then we would be doomed to failure from the outset.

The fourth word for love used in the New Testament, and certainly used by Matthew when he reported Jesus’ command “Love your enemies” is “**AGAPE**”. Unlike all the others, AGAPE stems not from the heart alone. AGAPE is not purely, or even mainly, an emotion - it is **an act of will**. It is something we must force ourselves to do, sometimes against our emotional response. Indeed in its highest forms it is something we cannot achieve of our own will, but requires the Grace and help of God to bring us to it. It is supremely **Love in Action**. Professor William Barclay describes AGAPE in these words:

If we regard a person with agape, it means that no matter what that person does to us, no matter how he treats us, no matter if he insults us or injures us or grieves us, we will never allow any bitterness against him to invade our hearts, but will regard him with that unconquerable benevolence and goodwill which seek nothing but his highest good.

When applied to our enemies, or indeed our friends, this is not the sort of doting, uncritical love which will allow us to turn a constantly blind eye to faults, failings, problems and misdemeanours. Rather it is the love which will chastise and correct, with the best interest of the loved one at heart.

Love, if it includes **AGAPE**, will not let us divorce ourselves from our world. With **PHILIA** alone we can go through life expressing, indeed feeling, love, but doing nothing. We can live in a cosy haze of emotional cotton wool. But **GOD IS LOVE - in its totality** and we cannot divorce one part or another, be it EROS, STORGE, PHILIA or AGAPE. The gift we are given at Christmas - “Love incarnate” is no trite thing., no mere bauble to play with and then discard. It is a gift which challenges us, like no other.

The Christmas Story and the Easter Story too are God’s Love in Action – actions which remains with us over 2000 years later. We should use this Christmas celebration to resolve to turn our love into action. At the close of the service there will be a retiring offering for the charity “Scottish Love in Action” , which supports children from some of the most disadvantaged families in India – the “Dalit” or “untouchables. But even more importantly, we should leave this Watchnight Service strengthened in our resolve to put our love into action in all we do, and with all whom we come into contact. This resolve would be a fitting gift to lay at the manger of the Christ Child of Bethlehem.

