

14th February 2021 – Vicky MacArthur

Today is Valentine's day is a day for telling your romantic loved ones how much they mean to you. It's a time when big, grand gestures are encouraged. And even for the those with the stiffest of upper lips, it's a time to talk about LOVE.

The cynics say it's all about money; a day designed by the card manufacturers to get us to part with our cash.

But as Christians maybe it should act as a reminder about the God we serve.

A God whose love is EVERYDAY marked by the grandest and most sacrificial of gestures, in that he sent his son Jesus as a living message of love to us all.

You may have come across a charming children's story called "Guess How Much I Love You?" in which Little Nutbrown Hare tries to outdo his father in the devotion stakes. In the end he believes he wins with "I love you right up to the moon", only to be out done having fallen asleep as Big Nutbrown Hare whispers, "I love you right up to the moon and back". This reminds me of my Father God whom I can never outdo in the devotion stakes, not least because he sent his only son to die for my sins on the cross so that I can properly live in God's love. It reminds me of this picture.

"I asked Jesus, 'How much do you love me?' and he stretched out his arms and died".

The Hebrew word for this type of love is 'hesed'. Hesed is everlasting, unconditional, self-sacrificial love. By using this word in 1 John 4: 7-21 the Apostle John wanted us to understand that God does not merely love, He is love. It is how God expresses his being. He loves us whether we love Him or not, or whether or not we are lovely because that is his nature, and he cannot do otherwise.

This is no ordinary love. No human 'verb' which can be taken, removed, or dulled down.

It does not fail. Psalm 136

It cannot be shaken. Isaiah 54:10

It is gracious and compassionate Psalm 148.

It is sacrificial. John 15:13

Above all else though, it is not merely words. It is who God is and is who we must be too.

Jesus made it clear that his disciples should be known for one thing. This one thing is not church attendance, Bible reading, praying, or baptism.

Jesus said,

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." -John 13:34-35

God commands us to love one another. Love is supposed to be the defining characteristic of our lives as Christians.

God loves us with such incredible love. He wants us to experience incredible, life-changing love, mercy, and compassion not only from him, but from those around us. And he wants us to show that love to others.

The call to love and help others in tangible ways — especially those weaker than ourselves — runs throughout the Bible. more than 560 verses from Genesis to Revelation deal with the responsibility of God's people to the poor and oppressed. And there are at least 556 more verses that say, basically, God expects His people — that's you and me — to care for the poor and oppressed in our world. We're to love our neighbours, foreigners, our enemies ... there's no getting out of it. This raises the question, Who is our neighbour? Jesus answered this question in the parable of the good Samaritan — it is anyone in need that we are in a position to help.

Every single person we meet is loved by God and is someone Jesus died for. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, not a select few. He died for our sins without conditions. In fact, He suffered and died knowing the world rejected Him, and we continue to reject Him daily when we fall short. Yet He loved us enough to take our place. The call to love is often difficult, but it's also a reminder of how God loves us: relentlessly, completely, and without expectation of return. God's call to love others is audacious. We're to put others ahead of ourselves, love people we don't like (or don't even know) and share our resources generously.

This is what God's love is all about! It is love with no strings attached. His love expects nothing in return.

When we show this kind of love, we are showing God's love. It's His love shining through us. Everyone we encounter through the day — strangers, acquaintances, friends, family — can experience God's love through us. Every day, we have the opportunity to show God's love to others.

Have you ever heard the saying, "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary use words." It's often attributed to something said by Saint Francis of Assisi, although some believe it's not the case. actions speak louder than words. What we do in showing God's love can touch people more than any sermon.

How does your life measure up to this one thing that Christ wants you to be known for? What areas do you need to work on to strengthen your love for others? How can you show God's love to someone today?

It might be by really listening to someone, being generous with a gift, providing encouragement, a kind act or praying for someone.

Lord, help us to love people as you love them. Lead us step by step into a greater understanding of what it means to love our neighbours as ourselves. Amen.