

AIM To unpack what John says in his first letter about Christian love and see how this applies to us
TEXTS 1 Samuel 1.20-28, 1John 4.7-16

(Slide 1) Who was John?

The traditional view is that the writer of this letter also wrote John's Gospel. Those who study such things tell us that what John is saying here is similar in style and approach to what we find in the gospel bearing his name.

Where and when did John write the letter?

John wrote this from Ephesus. It is uncertain when ; it may have been as late as AD 85-95. Which was roughly when both John's Gospel and the Book of Revelation were written.

Why did he write the letter?

His aim in writing was, as one commentator puts it , 'to dispel doubts and build assurance by presenting a clear picture of Christ'. Or putting it another way ; to provide Christians with a firm foundation for their faith. Christians who in the first century AD were living in a multi- faith society. Other faiths were competing with Christianity and so they needed to be equipped to contend for their faith. Also, Christians were being persecuted. This had begun in 64 AD following Nero's totally false accusation that Christians had started the great fire of Rome. Later on persecution continued sporadically throughout the Roman Empire as a consequence of an edict that Roman emperors were deities and so were to be worshipped. Which of course was totally out of question for Christians.

John had first hand experience of Jesus' life and ministry. And he had been an apostle for much of his long life. Now in old age he reflected on what his close personal relationship with Jesus meant to him and what as a result he had come to realise about the character of God the Father and of His Son. He wrote down some of these reflections in this letter. Probably intending it to be circulated to growing church fellowships in Asia Minor. But as we shall see, what he says is also really important for us today.

(Slide 2)

The Content of the Letter Turning now to take a look at the detail. We find how he perceives God. Here John uses three stark metaphors. He sets out what he has to say under three headings. First seeing God as Light (Ch.1.1-2.27). Second seeing God as Love (Ch 2.28-4.21). And finally seeing God as Life (Ch. 5.1-21).

In addition to these three vivid metaphors, John uses simple words and short sentences. Hoping that this will help his readers to understand something of the profound insights he is trying to share with them.

We turn now to look at his Second Metaphor :God is Love (Ch 4 verses7-16)

Earlier on he referred to his readers as-' Children of God'- emphasising the familial relationship they have with their Heavenly Father – and also with one another . He has already appealed to them to love one another. And now he goes on to explore a bit further what this means for them- both as individuals and in their communal life together.

As we look now at this passage the first thing we note is how many times the words, 'love, 'love and 'beloved 'come up ;some seventeen times, I think ! Leaving us in absolutely no doubt then what all this is about.

Starting by addressing his readers as 'Dear friends, he goes on to make the following points.

*In v7/8 Here he tells us that God is the source of love. It should be no surprise, since God is love and the source of love, for He has made us , His creatures with an ability ,with a capacity to love. So we can

love Him and love other people also. John continues, *everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. That is; referring to those born of God ie who have been 'born again'*. Reminding us here of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus (as described in John's Gospel chapter 3.) **(Slide 3)**

What sort of love is this? And how do we recognize it?

We need to be clear here what sort of love John is talking about . It's not the sort of love the secular world knows and values so highly. That kind of love is a feeling , an emotion. And a strong one too. Which may end up being self- serving in its expression. When John tells us that God is Love, he's referring to a different love - Christian love. Christian love is different. It is unconditional and involves first, making a choice and second, taking some action solely for the benefit of the other, the recipient of this Christian love. It's a love expressed wholly for the benefit of and in the best interests of the other.

John goes on to give us the supreme example of this kind of love. Which turns out, not surprisingly, to be what we find referred to in verse 10

This is love not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent His only Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (Slide 4)

It was our sinfulness which prevented our entering into a relationship with our Holy perfect God. We ourselves could do nothing to bridge that gap and restore that relationship with Our Heavenly Father. But because of his love for us, His unconditional love which we had no right to deserve, God took the initiative and at indescribably great cost ,He made it possible for that relationship with us to be restored!

John goes on in verses 11 and 12 to point out what follows from this. That as a result of God's initiative then surely we ought to love one another. If we do so, then God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

What happens when we begin live like this?

When a community of Christians commits to live in this loving way, the Holy Spirit sets about drawing them together. The more individuals love one another the more profound their mutual love for one another becomes. Interdependence develops, their communal quality of life becomes distinctive. Sooner or later non Christian folk may notice and begin to ask why this is. We have an early example of this distinctiveness being commented upon . Way back in the first century AD Pliny a senior Roman administrator, who was at the time a provisional governor in Asia Minor, noting the communal lifestyle of Christians wrote " see how these Christians love one another."

And this distinctiveness still occurs today whenever Christians begin to take seriously what John says and start caring for one another like this. As they become drawn closer to the Lord and to one another their quality of life becomes distinctive. Some may enquire why this is so, providing an opportunity for explaining 'the reason for the hope that is in them'.

Abiding

Finally we move on to what verses 12-16 have to say *V12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.* How do we know that this is so? v13 answers this for us.. *By this we know that we abide in him and he in us because he has given us of His Spirit.* Implying, I think that it is the Holy Spirit. who began to dwell in us when we came to faith in Christ who is now confirming that we are living in God and He in us. And it is the Holy Spirit who sustains the relationship with our loving Heavenly Father. Enabling us to live for one another in the way that is pleasing to Him.

Summing up then..

We've had a brief look at what John means when he says that **God is love**. We've heard a bit about what this Christian love is like. And have been reminded that the supreme example of God's unconditional selfless love is his sending His Son Jesus to atone for our sins. So providing a means of restoring our relationship with Him. Further, that in response to God's loving action for us we in our turn are called to

live in community and to love one another in a like, life changing manner. And finally that while we are engaged in doing this, God the Holy Spirit abides with us, enabling and sustaining us in this relationship. In conclusion, I refer to what one commentator says about John's insight that **God is Love**.

He says : **Here we have the heart of the New Testament, here we have the heart of the Bible, here we have the Heart of God. AMEN**