

## God is Love

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Sun 4 November 2019 at a service of Baptism with Holy Communion.

*Refs: Deuteronomy 6.1-9, Hebrews 9.11-14, Mark 12.28-34*

Our readings today sum up what Baptisms and Weddings are all about at heart – love. Love for each other, love for each other that brings new life, love for our children, and love for our families.

But our readings take us even deeper than that, reminding us that faith in God is in the end all about love – love is what really matters. As St Paul says in his letter to the Galatians – a letter that embodies the essence of his teaching – Christianity is not about rules and regulations. Rather he says: *“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.”*

Here is the moment for my thank you. Jane and I had a great week in Italy last week, at the European Parkinson’s Therapy Centre. It was not only about the physiotherapy I experienced during that week, but also about the change it will continue to bring as I continue those exercises in the months to come – and more importantly everything we learned as they helped us to think about our lifestyle in the future. And those Italian Alps are beautiful as well! On a couple of different occasions I told people that our week in Italy was a gift from St Peter’s congregation. Jaws dropped and people said, “Wow they must really love you!” So thank you and thank you again. Without your gift we would not have gone.

As St Paul says: *“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.”*

To follow Christ means to learn to love. Conversely when Christians talk about sin, we’re not talking about doing naughty things, or saying or thinking naughty things. No - sin simply means our failure to love – our failure to love God, and our failure to love our neighbour. St John puts it even more strongly in his letter in the New Testament: *“God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God lives in them.”*

That tells us something very important. The reason Jesus tells us to love God and love our neighbour is that God is Love – love is the nature of God, and God is the source of all love.

What does all this mean? What is God’s love like?

I want to say seven things which describe what God’s love is like – seven things which tell us about God’s love, and which we can also aspire to as we seek to learn to love also.

1. *God’s love is free and unconditional.* We cannot earn God’s love, and neither do we need to. God’s love is free – freely given to us. God loves us, not because we are good, but because He is good.
2. *God’s love is without limit.* We see that most clearly on the Cross, where in Jesus, God gives everything, holding nothing back. He could not love us more than He does. His love is without limit. Pretty jaw dropping when you think about it.
3. *God’s love sets us free,* he does not control us. In the famous parable of the prodigal son, we see the Father’s love not only in the way he welcomes his son back, but also in the way he lets him go in the first place. God will not control us. His love sets us

free – he wants us to make our own decisions, however bad those decisions may sometimes be! His love sets us free.

4. *God's love is compassionate.* Literally – He feels our pain and suffers with us. Surely that is what the Cross shows us more than anything else. Jesus on the Cross reveals to us a God who shares in our suffering – the true meaning of compassion.
5. *God's love is gentle.* He responds to us where we are. God is gentle with us. It may be helpful to think of it as a motherly love as well as a fatherly love. As Jesus says, “*How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. A*” gentle, tender touch of love.
6. *God's love is also strong* - strong to protect us from others and from ourselves. God's love is willing to challenge us. People sometimes talk of “tough love” – and that's important. Let me tell you – that Parkinson's therapy week was not all easy. They warned us weren't there to do things we could already do. We were there to do things we thought we couldn't do! Dead right – tough love! Also they helped us to face the future honestly and positively, and not hide from it. That's a kind of tough love as well. God's love is a tough love – a love that is willing to challenge us and disturb us, in order to help us to grow and to fulfil our potential. God loves us exactly as we are – but He loves us far too much to leave us that way.
7. Finally, *God's love is unstoppable, irrepressible and unquenchable.* So strong is God's love, that when Jesus died on the Cross, his body broken and buried, on the third day he springs back to life again. It is impossible to hold down the love of God. It's a bit like those relighting candles – that you blow out but they keep coming back.

At the end of our service we're going to give each of our children being baptised a lighted candle. That lighted candle is a symbol of the unquenchable love of God – that with God, love will triumph, in the end. How much we need to hear that in our world today! That in the end it will be love that lasts, love that wins the day. Power comes and power goes, but Love is forever.

So today in Baptism we give this gift of love to our children being baptised. And we all are invited again

- to welcome that love of God into our hearts and our lives
- to understand more deeply the love of God for each one of us
- and to respond by reflecting that love back to God, and by reaching out in love to our neighbour, to those around us.

Amen