

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

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**Eglise Sacré-Coeur, Oppède**

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Today I cannot avoid talking about a subject that I know more about in theory than I do in practice and that is the subject of love. I have to confess at the beginning that I have been very careless with love in my life; the love I have been given by my family, the love that I have been given by those who have prayed for me on their knees and I am ashamed to say, the love that I have been given by God. I have also been careless in how I have scattered what I always thought of as love to others including my family. With that confession out of the way let us turn to our gospel reading for today which is almost a repeat from last week's epistle from John where he talks about God's love and ours. But here it is Jesus Himself who is talking so we better pay attention.

So, let's talk about love! The first obstacle we run into is that love in the English language covers such a wide spectrum of meanings: fondness, adoration, devotion, warmth, affection, infatuation, adulation, ardour, passion, charity etc. It expresses an intense feeling or deep affection as in: babies fill parents with feelings of love. Love is also used to express a great interest and pleasure in something: Peter loves his golf. Michael loves his dog. Christopher loves his rugby and I am led to believe he also loves Sarah. However, unlike English, when we look at the ancient Greek in which the New Testament was written, we see four distinct words used to describe the over-arching concept we refer to as "love". These words are eros, storge, phileo, and agape. We'll explore these different types of love as used in the Bible, and as we do, hopefully we'll discover what Jesus meant when He said love God and love one another.

Of the four Greek words that describe love in the Bible we are probably most familiar with the word **eros**. This means sensual, sexual or romantic love. The term originated from Eros the Greek mythological god of love, sexual desire, physical attraction and physical love. The Greek word Eros itself is not in the

Bible. The New Testament never directly addresses the topic of passionate, romantic love. When the topic of sexuality is discussed, it is in terms of providing proper boundaries or prohibiting harmful behaviour. God is very clear that eros love is reserved for marriage; expressions of love carried out between a husband and wife. Promiscuity was rampant in ancient Greek culture and was one of the obstacles the apostle Paul had to battle when new churches were being started. Paul warned new believers against succumbing to immorality: "I say to those who aren't married and to widows—it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust." But within the boundary of marriage, eros love is to be celebrated and enjoyed as a beautiful blessing from God.

Neither is the word eros found in the Old Testament of course for those books were written in Hebrew. However, there is a very potent example of eros in the Song of Solomon which, to use an old term, we would even today describe as raunchy. I do not know how the book was included in the Bible. But it is important to note that the Bible does not shy away from the reality of romantic love and the sensations of physical passion; indeed, Scripture elevates physical love when experienced within proper boundaries.

The second word **storge** is a term for love in the Bible that you may not have heard before. This Greek word describes family love, the affectionate bond that develops naturally between parents and children, and sometimes between brothers and sisters. This kind of love is steady and sure. It is love that comes without invitation and endures for a lifetime. It is powerful. I remember hearing a mother of a young man who had murdered two people saying whilst she hated what her son had done, she still loved him and always would.

Storge can also describe love between a husband and wife, but this kind of love is not passionate or erotic. Rather, it's a familiar love. It's the result of living together day after day and settling into each other's rhythms, rather than a "love at first sight" kind of love.

There is only one example of the word storge in the New Testament and even that usage is contested. Paul, writing to the Romans, said "Be devoted to one another in love [storge]" thus encouraging them to relate in a familial sort of way. But, whilst there are not many uses of storge in the Bible, there are many examples of this love in action: Noah taking his family into the Ark, Lot leaving Sodom taking his family with him, Rahab saving her family in Jericho and that beautiful picture of sibling love between Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Our third word ***phileo*** originates from the Greek term *phílos*, a noun meaning "beloved friend"; someone dearly loved in a personal, intimate way; a trusted confidant held in a close bond of personal affection. The powerful emotional bond seen in deep friendships.

Phileo is the most general type of love in Scripture, encompassing love for fellow humans, care, respect, and compassion for people in need. The concept of brotherly love that unites believers is unique to Christianity. Jesus said phileo would be an identifier of his followers: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." Love in action.

Phileo describes an emotional connection that goes beyond acquaintances or casual friendships. When we experience phileo, we experience a deeper level of connection. Those relationships when you seem to know what the other is thinking. This connection is different to the love within a family, perhaps, nor does it carry the intensity of romantic passion or erotic love. Two examples: schoolboys, *Women in Love* example Oliver Reed and Alan Bates wrestling naked.

The word phileo is used several times throughout the New Testament. One example is when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. When Jesus arrives at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Lazarus has been dead two days. Standing outside the tomb Jesus wept and the Jews said, "See how He loved [*phileo*] him!" Jesus had a close and personal friendship with Lazarus. They shared a phileo bond—a love born of mutual connection and appreciation.

And fourthly we come to the big one – ***agape***. It is the highest of the four types of love in the Bible because it is divine love defining as it does God's immeasurable, incomparable love for humankind. Agape love is perfect, pure, sacrificial, self-less, self-giving, and unconditional. Jesus Christ demonstrated this divine love to his Father and to all humanity in the way he lived and died. This Greek word, *agápē* and variations of it are frequently found throughout the New Testament but rarely in non-Christian Greek literature.

Agape love is more than an emotion. It is a foundational sense that demonstrates itself through actions. Agape is God's ongoing and outgoing concern for lost and fallen people. God gives this love without condition, unreservedly to those who are undeserving. And this is the definition of grace – undeserved love. Agape love is unmotivated in the sense that it is not contingent

on any value or worth in the object of love. It is spontaneous and heedless, for it does not ask beforehand whether love will be effective or appropriate in any particular case.

Agape love is the love that Paul was talking about in his famous "love chapter" (1 Corinthians 13). Agape love is patient and kind, love is not boastful, arrogant, rude or envious. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. And these three things remain: faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love. This passage is a popular reading at weddings and when I hear it and look at the couple deep in romantic love, I wonder if they have any comprehension at all of what these words mean.

Agape love is not merely an attribute of God, it is His essence. God is fundamentally love. That is the beginning and end of love, yet because love is God, it does not have any beginning or end.

### **An illustration of the difference between phileo love and agape love**

You will remember that during the Last Supper Peter was adamant that he would never deny nor abandon Jesus, no matter what may come and within 24 hours Peter had denied even knowing Jesus three times to avoid being arrested himself. After Christ's resurrection, Peter was forced to confront his failure when he met Jesus on the lakeshore. This is their exchange:

*Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love [agape] Me more than these?"*

*"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "You know that I love [phileo] You." "Feed My lambs," Jesus said. A second time Jesus asked Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love [agape] Me?" "Yes, Lord," Peter answers, "You know that I love [phileo] You." "Shepherd My sheep," Jesus says. Peter was grieved when Jesus asked him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" But as is the way with our Lord he was wonderfully gentle with Peter, in this third asking using phileo rather than agape "Do you love [phileo] Me?" Jesus asked, "Lord, You know everything! You know that I love [phileo] You." "Feed My sheep," Jesus said.*

Peter affirmed his close friendship with Jesus—his strong emotional connection—but he wasn't able to grant himself the ability to demonstrate

divine love. He was aware of his own shortcomings. And Jesus affirmed His friendship with Peter—His phileo love and companionship. The key point is that Peter had not yet received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Until then he was incapable of agape love. But after Pentecost, Peter was so full of God's love that he spoke from his heart and 3,000 people were converted.

But let us return to our gospel reading to understand how this is to work:

- The Father's love for Jesus was the model for Jesus' love of the disciples;
- The obedient love Jesus had for the Father was to be the model for the disciples' love for him (that includes you and me)
- The self-sacrificing love Jesus had for them (that includes you and me) was to be the model of their love for each other. "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

The good news in this is that the initiative was all taken by Jesus. He chose them (and that includes you and me) and not they him. His design was that they should bear fruit, and his command was that they should love each other

Love is one of the most powerful emotions humans can experience. For Christian believers, love is the truest test of genuine faith. Through the Bible, we discover how to experience love in its many forms and to share it with others as God intended. When Jesus talks about loving our enemies, He is talking about agape love – divine love. So, if you are not quite there don't worry; keep trying, for it is divine love we are seeking to emulate.