

Advent: Living Out Love - 5th December 2021

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Date: 05 December 2021

Preacher: Dave Moss

- [0 : 00] Good morning and welcome to the second of our Advent talks. Matt led us last Sunday with a powerful and moving reflection on hope and I do encourage you to catch up and listen online if you missed it.
- So today we've lit a second candle for our reflections on love and the theme is taken from 1 John 4 verse 16 and we know and rely on the love God has for us.
- Just a little about myself first of all. I've taught in a Welsh comprehensive school for 27 years and so I'm more used to looking and speaking to teenagers.
- So if I tell you suddenly to sit up straight, pay attention and stop looking out the window just take it as a compliment because you all look young to me.
- And I currently work as an education advisor and these past 20 months have found myself holding lots of meetings and training online.
- [1 : 10] So if I suddenly put you on mute or go mute myself... Oh, sorry, sorry, sorry. Please, please don't, please don't be offended.
- It's just the technology, okay. Right. This time last year, this sign appeared on our mantelpiece. I'm not quite sure of the theology behind it or indeed the verse it comes from in the Bible but I'm assured it is correct.
- And then, seven months later, this appeared. I'm not sure that cuteness is in the Bible either nor is being adorable but there's definitely love in there somewhere.
- This is the trouble with the word love in English. It's much used and indeed much overused.
- And we mostly see it as a romantic notion. All is lovey-dovey and nice. And if we're not careful, we project this into the Christmas story.
- [2 : 29] Mary and Joseph, two people deeply in love, having a fun time of it and with a baby as a bonus. It's just so beautiful.
- Of course, Mary and Joseph loved each other but it's far more complex than that. Mary tends to get a lot of good press in the Christmas story but what of Joseph?
- Is he really just an add-on? Just to fill out a line of descendants as mentioned last week in the reading from Matthew? Listen to the story this morning and try and hear it from Joseph's perspective.
- This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. Joseph was born in the Bible.
- But before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.
- [3 : 48] But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.
- All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son, and he gave him the name Jesus.

Well, this is how the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, came about.

[5 : 22] His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. But before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Well, it's not exactly going well, is it, this romance?

He finds out that Mary is pregnant. Not exactly what you want to hear. And of course, he suspects adultery. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

I just love this picture. It says at all, how could you? It's complicated too. Betrothal was far more binding under Jewish law, and not as simple as breaking off an engagement is today.

To break the terms of the betrothal, it meant a procedure more like divorce. The grounds for the divorce, well, adultery. And what did adultery mean?

Well, it could possibly mean a stoning. Joseph is a devout Jew, trying to live by the law, and so he knows he can't marry her, but he loves Mary, and so wants to divorce her quietly, basically to protect her.

[6 : 46] He does what is expected of him, even if this pains him greatly. All too often, this is the issue for us.

We believe certain things are expected of us. The right thing to do. The right way to do things. To do exactly what's expected of us.

But after he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

God, as we know, has other ideas. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The Bible is big on dreams, and the Christmas story is big on angels.

Joseph may, hang on a minute. Don't be afraid. Another Christmas theme. Don't be afraid, says God. This will be all right. You can marry the one you love, because I am with you in this situation.

[7 : 55] This baby is mine. Now, I really feel for Joseph at this point. It's not, wow, great thanks.

Thanks God, it'll all be fine then. Having a pregnant fiancé by someone else doesn't suddenly make it easy, even if the conception is from God.

What will people say? Hang on. We will suddenly have an extra person to provide for, and we haven't even started our married life. Hang on.

I'm still expected to be the father here, and I'm still not officially the husband. Hang on. What will people think and say? But he does say yes.

Yes, because he loves Mary. Yes, because he knows God loves him, whatever the situation, or whatever the circumstance, he finds himself in.

[8 : 56] And these circumstances are not easy. I know. Let's trek off to Bethlehem for a census with a pregnant woman on the back of a donkey. Did he bargain for that?

It's not exactly the ideal honeymoon, is it? Did he bargain for a birth in an out-of-the-way place? And later we know, did he bargain having to flee to Egypt to escape death and danger?

But Joseph was given a very important task. And you are to give him the name Jesus. And you are to give him the name Jesus.

The father names the son. And you are to give him the name Jesus. Joseph has been asked to be his parent, to be responsible, to go far, far beyond what the rules required, to go far beyond what is expected of him.

Because Joseph knows God loves him as he is and not as the rules require, not as people expect, not as the right thing to do appears to be.

[10 : 25] God often calls us all to do things quite differently, not as the rules require, not as would be expected in the situation.

This is my Aunt Jean, my mother's older sister. And forgive me here, because I'm trying to do a quite complex story in a short space of time.

Auntie Jean never married. She was engaged to be married, but called it off. The family expectation was that her duty was to be married.

It's a very complicated background situation, but just take it that that was her duty to get married. And so she was seen as a failure. She had a breakdown and distanced herself from the family's small world which existed and its expectations.

She had a number of mental health issues. Somehow, particularly after my mother died, when I was in my 20s, she always kept in contact with me. We could talk, and she had a keen faith which really helped when we talked.

[11 : 38] And she had a good circle of friends who supported her. But nevertheless, she was the outcast of the family, the one not worth bothering with. She found it difficult to work, which didn't help.

In later years, she ended up in a home largely due to the mental health issues. She had a stroke and came through it well after a period of time. But we got on well, and she often came to our home from time to time.

A few years ago, we had just got back home after a family holiday away. It was a Sunday evening.

It was dark, and there was heavy rain. The phone rang. It was my uncle, her brother, to explain that she had had a stroke and been rushed into hospital, this hospital in Telford.

She was not conscious, and there was probably hemorrhaging on the brain, so it did not look good. I asked if we could visit, but was told it wasn't worth it, as she would not know who we are, and the phone call ended.

[12 : 47] I was deeply uneasy about this, and Jan encouraged me to ring the hospital, which I did, and they encouraged us to come and visit straight away.

So off Jan and I went in the still pouring rain on a very dark night to arrive at an almost deserted hospital, and it seemed bleak. We were ushered inside a room where my aunt lay, and the nurse took me to one side and said there was probably not much time left, but encouraged us to talk and hold our hand, as feeling and hearing were often the last to go.

So that's what we did, Jan and I. We held our hand and talked. We said a few Bible verses, which we could remember, and sang a bit. We left a while later and noticed a small vase of flowers on the table and thought how nice that was.

She died in the early hours of that night, alone, forgotten, or so it seemed. My uncle arranged the funeral. It was just at the crematorium, not what she'd have wanted, and not that many people were there either.

After the brief ceremony, my aunt's cousin engaged me in conversation. She'd always been a good friend to my aunt, and that conversation was a whole story in itself. She was far from pleased about the funeral arrangements.

[14 : 07] She'd discovered that many had not been invited or even knew my aunt had died. But this is what she said, that she'd been to see my Auntie Jean that rainy night, despite being told not to bother.

She'd taken a small bunch of flowers and left them in a vase. She'd held her hand and sang to her. What is more, she said that she'd contacted the Methodist minister, and she suggested I talk to her.

And she'd briefly led the ceremony at the crematorium that day. So I spoke to her to discover that she, too, had gone to the hospital that rainy night. I asked her what she did there.

Well, she said, I held her hand and read verses from the Bible. It's then I realised that God had had it all under control. The crematorium wasn't the funeral.

That took place in the last hours in a hospital room when God called those who cared for her on a rainy night to be at her bedside and make it extra special.

[15 : 11] Flowers and all. You see, God did not look at Auntie Jean the way everyone else did. He accepted her as she is, as she was, and not as others think she should be.

Isn't this not love this Christmas time? God comes to us as we are, whatever the situation. God loves you as you are and not as you think you should be.

Here are a few photos taken during lockdown which illustrate so well love bursting out in a current difficult situation. The print might be a bit small so I'll read it for you.

So this is called Distance Gaining. And lockdown was tough for an only child while delivering supplies to my daughter, Freya's isolating Nana and Pop on Anna's birthday.

We raise spirits by playing games through the glass on the front door. And Anna looks like she's trying not to be beaten by a six-year-old. And there they are playing noughts and crosses on there.

[16 : 19] And never without her grandma, Millie Lewis. Millie, five years old, made a cut out of her loved grandma, 73 years old.

Millie sees grandma almost every day and lockdown prevented the pair from seeing each other. As a retired teacher, grandma would have made the perfect partner to help Millie with her homeschooling.

This is Bunbury Church in Cheshire where I have a lot of family connections and indeed my parents got married. And this is what the vicar there did.

Tim Haywood. I've had quite a bit to do with him in recent years. And when it was announced that church buildings were to be closed to the public to reduce the transmission of the virus, I wanted to assure our community that although we couldn't gather physically, their photos in church were a symbol that they and their loved ones were still very much in our thoughts and prayers.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Whatever our situation, God loves us.

[17 : 34] No matter what we think we should be doing or how we think we should be doing it, do we really believe this or are they just nice words?

Now, as many of you know, I am a super Christian. I'm not normally in these clothes. That's my normal outfit when I'm out and about. I move around with a super grin on my face, permanently in state of blessedness.

I read my Bible all the time and every prayer is answered. Me and God are best buddies and I have a hotline to God. I have all the answers and life is just one smooth pathway to heaven.

And I'm also lying. I've been fed that lie about the Christian life that one, things are all one smooth path and if I could pray better and read the Bible more, then all will be well.

Actually, this picture, which Matt shared last week, is more like it. Life is more like a roller coaster with ups and downs, often at top speed, taking turns when I least expect them.

[18 : 50] sometimes afraid, sometimes thrilled, sometimes enjoying the ride, sometimes just glad when it stops.

Last week, Matt shared these post-traumatic stress symptoms. These are the ones I most identify with.

This is the full house of my experience during the pandemic. I could tell you how I've experienced each one and continue to experience each one.

this isn't what I bargained for. This is not on my super Christian list. Does God really want me to feel like this?

I have no easy answers. But I do know that God loves me as I am and not as I think I should be. The coming of Jesus is the coming of the Messiah, the one equipped with the Holy Spirit.

[19 : 59] The conception of Jesus by the Spirit is the beginning of the work which will issue new life for the world so that all may know God's love.

Your true self, your very soul is who you are in God and who God is in you. Your true self is born of the Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit poured into your heart. This is what's given to you. And hope does not put us to shame because God's love has poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Have we discovered this love? Or is the baby still in the manger? Love is God's gift to us at Christmas.

In fact, on any day. In fact, every day. God is not out there as many think, believe, and behave.

[21 : 17] He comes and brings his love in here. no matter what we feel, no matter what is going on, God's love is not really an action that you do.

Love is who you are in God. God's love already has a place inside of you.

Don't let others tell you what it should be or what it should look like. Don't let yourself be fooled into being someone you are not. Love is not something you can buy, nor is love something you can attain or achieve.

Love is your identity in God. But God loves you as you are and not as you think you should be.

Joseph knew this. Many Christians have known this and know this today. Many Christians do not know this. They're still playing at being super Christian.

[22 : 26] This in all my confusion is my experience too and God keeps bringing me back to that. He loves me no matter what. No ifs or buts.

He just loves me. This is what Joseph knew no matter what the situation. This is what so many know the world over. No matter what their situation.

This is love come down at Christmas. Emmanuel God with us always. Is this your experience? Is this your Christmas?

Or do you think you should be someone else? God always loves and is forever united to us in love. It is love God sees in you.

He does not reject. God loves you as you are and not as you think you should be. I don't think about you as much as I say I do.

[23 : 44] I don't breathe you in as much as I pretend I love I just run in circles getting tired I'm trying to fill your space with my desires somehow you're still here and I still feel your touch God God I can't believe your love I've been chasing dreams like when chasing the fallen leaves I've been chasing things but all this time

Lord you've been chasing me oh I want my love for you to be strong as yours is for me cause even when I turn my back you stay when every thought in me goes my own way somehow you're still here and I am still enough God I can't believe your love I been chasing dreams like when chasing the falling reels

I been chasing dreams but all this time Lord you've been chasing me oh I have been chasing me oh you've been chasing me yes Lord me oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh I've been chasing dreams even chasing like we're chasing the falling leaves

I've been chasing things but all this time Lord you've been Chasing me low Let us pray.

Lord, I can't believe your love. I've been chasing dreams like wind chasing the falling leaves. I've been chasing things, but all this time, Lord, you have been chasing me.

[27 : 39] For you and you alone love me as I am and not as I think I should be. Amen.