

Words of Love

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[0 : 00] We're going to read from John chapter 19, starting at verse 16. Finally, Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.

There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on each side and Jesus in the middle. Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross.

It read, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek.

The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, Do not write the King of the Jews, but that this man claimed to be the King of the Jews.

[1 : 04] Pilate answered, What I have written, I have written. When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining.

This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. Let's not tear it, they said to one another. Let's decide by lot who will get it.

This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment. So this is what the soldiers did.

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, Woman, here is your son.

And to the disciple, Here is your mother. From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. It was great to read just a little while ago from John's Gospel with Anna Lauren.

[2 : 21] Just hearing again what happened to Jesus, and how Jesus dealt with suffering, and how he spoke as he suffered from the cross.

Because when we see people under pressure, when we see them in pain or under great duress, we're often given an insight into the reality of their character.

It's hard to fake it when you're in terrible pain. And at the cross, we get to see something of the reality of Jesus' heart. And what an amazing, loving heart we find out that Jesus has.

So there are words of forgiveness from Jesus on the cross. There are words of welcome from Jesus on the cross. And today we're just seeing that there are words of love from Jesus on the cross as he speaks to his mother and to John the Apostle, the beloved disciple that he addresses here in John chapter 19 as well.

So that's a really important truth that we're going to find out about is how Jesus speaks with such love. Let me just read his words again. And when Jesus saw his mother there and the disciple whom he loves standing nearby, he said to his mother, Dear woman, here is your son.

[3 : 45] And to the disciple, here is your mother. From that time on, this disciple took her in to his home. There were storms in Edinburgh recently.

I wasn't here. I was in Ardnun Muddecan. But people were sending me pictures of this amazing electric storm that there was and just this incredible lightning and thunder that there was over Edinburgh.

Some really dramatic pictures. I remember being in storms like that, not in Edinburgh, but in Florence with Louise not long after we were married. And when you're in a really bad storm, of course, you just want to run for shelter.

And our thought this week, our focus this week, if you're thinking on Thursday, what was Neil talking about? What I really want you to remember is this, that God's love is a shelter even in the wildest storm.

Here's a mother seeing her son being put to death in the most brutal way. And Jesus reaches out to her with words of love to offer her a shelter in this storm.

[4 : 55] So these are verses that give us an insight into the power and the importance of the selfless love that we see in Jesus Christ. And I want to say to myself and to you that the love, this sheltering love, these great loving words of Jesus, that that's the kind of love where we will find the peace that we long for, but often seems elusive.

Sheltering under his love will bring us peace. God's love is a shelter even in the wildest storm. From the darkness of the cross, Jesus reaches out to his mother and to his friend John with words of love, kindness and comfort to provide a shelter for her, a home where she'll be healed of hurts.

And what we begin to see here, I think, is that in the way that Jesus deals with suffering, in the way that Jesus deals with sin and cruelty and violence, in the way that Jesus responds to the darkness, that he's beginning to give us a glimpse of a different kind of world, an alternative vision of what this world could be like.

So that's the first place I want us to go this morning, is to say that as we see Jesus here, he is painting for us an alternative vision for the world that we live in.

And I was doing some work with Laird this week, another guy that works at Cornerstone. And we're going to be building a new website for the congregation as we move back into the old schoolhouse later this year.

[6 : 38] And I was looking at various church websites from all around the world. And one of the websites I landed on was a church called Red Church in Melbourne, Australia.

And I looked at just the way they've set things out, how they speak about their church. And I was really struck by their vision statement, which is quite simple, but I liked it.

Red Church Vision, to be a church of passionate, committed disciples devoted to Christ's alternative for the world. And I thought that was just such an interesting way of talking about it, was to say that Christ got an alternative for this world.

He's offering something different and something better. And it's an agenda of love. It's an alternative agenda of love that Jesus is offering. He's not got an agenda for religion.

He's not got an agenda that's just about going to church. He's not just got an agenda about being a good person and following the rules. Those of us who follow Jesus, we follow him because we've captured something of his vision for a better kind of world, a world that is rooted in love rather than in darkness.

[7 : 55] An understanding that Jesus has an agenda to bless this world through the outpouring of his love into our lives. I think we all recognize, whoever we are, whatever our beliefs and our circumstances, there's not enough love in this world.

Many people grow up starved of love. Many adults live even in their marriages, if they're married, feeling unloved, uncared for.

We pursue selfish agendas to advance our career or to enhance our academic prestige, to make more money or to get a nicer house.

We serve the idols of pride, greed, fun, pleasure, comfort. And in doing so, of course, we become loveless.

We neglect other people. We leave them alone. We forget about them and their needs. So there's a deficit of love in us and around us.

[9 : 06] Even worse, it's not just sometimes that there's a deficit of love. It's that there's an active destructiveness. There's lust. There's anger.

There's power. There's actively wicked people doing actively wicked things. Abusing, enslaving, trafficking other human beings.

Suffering comes like a flood in the wake of their activities. And that's happening in the world all around us. We might want to ignore injustice and cruelty.

But it's there in our cities and in our streets. And we let our hearts become calloused to how awful things are in this world for very many people.

As a church, one of the organizations we love to support is the International Justice Mission, who do great work to combat human trafficking, slavery, forced labor, who are advocates for the poor in the face of lawlessness and violence.

[10 : 10] Where does that heart come from to stand up for the oppressed? It comes from love, a love of others. And there's just not enough of that kind of love in this world and in me and probably in you.

And so Jesus comes into this lawless, loveless world, running the agendas of self-interest, power and greed. And instead he comes with an alternative vision of radical, selfless love.

And guess what? That's why he's been killed, isn't it? That's why he's on this cross that we're reading about. Because his agenda doesn't fit with the agenda of the powerful and the popular.

But even as they crucify him for opposing their agenda, even as they plunge him into a deep vat of boiling hot pain, that won't stop Jesus from loving others.

He still, even from the cross, lives a life of selfless love, dies a death of selfless love. To his very last breath.

[11 : 24] So let's remember this, that God's agenda of love triumphs over every vision of life. God's agenda of love triumphs over every other vision of life.

That's what the cross is showing us. They try to destroy this alternative vision, but God triumphs. Jesus doesn't stop loving, even in the face of great cruelty.

So this alternative vision that comes from Jesus is one that will win over and win through and be sustained. And one day will flood the whole world with a sense of God's glory and goodness.

So love is really important. Jesus is showing love to his mother. He brings in John, the disciple that he loves. Now this word love, what do we mean?

So I was reading about this earlier in the week and somebody was saying, you know, the English word for love, we use it to cover so many different things.

[12 : 35] So I love pizza. I love my mum. It's the same word, but surely we're trying to say something different. That the way we feel about our mum is more profound than the way we feel about pizza.

I really hope that's the case. So one of the good things to understand here is that in the Greek language where the New Testament is written, there were four different words for love.

So there was a word, phylos, which was much more about the love of friends. So Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love.

Philia, friendship love. Storge was familial love. Eros, erotic, romantic, physical, sexual love.

But the word that's used here and the word that is used predominantly in the New Testament for love is a different word from family love or physical love or romantic love or friendship love.

[13 : 46] It's a word agape. And agape describes a generous love, a very deliberate love. It's choosing to love someone in a very active way.

It's choosing to love a person in a way that will strive for their highest good. It's a love that gives itself without looking for anything back.

Agape love. We read about it all the time in the New Testament as Jesus moves towards the poor, the hurting, the marginalized and the sick to help and to give to them expecting nothing in return.

So agape love, the standard of it is set by God himself in Jesus. The most amazing example of agape love is the cross.

Jesus dying for sinners, his enemies. And God wants us to reflect that same kind of selfless, deliberate love for others.

[14 : 50] Where we're not just loving our family or our friends or those who can give something back to us. But where we're loving our enemies, where we're loving those who are in need and those who can't repay any kind of favor.

That's the radical vision of love that our world needs, that Edinburgh needs, that Cornerstone needs, that our neighborhood in Morningside and Bruntsfield needs.

We can never have enough of that kind of selfless love in our world. And we want to strive by God's grace to create an ecosystem of love where each of us is pouring out love to others in selfless ways.

So that's the alternative vision that God's got for his world. A world of agape love, selfless love that's rooted in the love that we see in Jesus here at the cross.

Where he's not just giving us an example of love. But where he is loving us in such a way that he will take our sin in himself. Forgive us and restore us into relationship with God.

[16 : 00] And it's out of that restored relationship with God that we will find the resources to love other people as Jesus has loved us.

More on that later, hopefully. Let's bash on. Time is going. So it's an alternative vision for the world, but it's also a very personal vision for the world.

Now, what I mean by that is that there's lots of utopians out there. And I was reading a book called The Gentleman in Moscow recently about life in Moscow after the Bolshevik Revolution.

A vision for a reordered world, a restructured society that would bring justice and peace and prosperity. And yet, in many of those kind of systems, what we found, of course, was that people were crushed and cast aside for the greater good.

Now, Jesus' vision is not like that. It's very personal. That's what I mean by a personalized vision for the future. That he, in the way that he thinks about the world and its future, he thinks not just about the collective, about the big picture.

[17 : 15] He thinks about you and your picture and your life and your needs. It's very, very personal. And that's amazing because Jesus has been treated in the most impersonal, dehumanized way of all, isn't he?

He's been treated as a non-person. He's been destroyed for the name of the system. You know, he's been put to death because he's opposing the system.

And he is treated as a non-person. But he doesn't respond in kind. He loves in the most personal ways. He's arrested and mocked and belittled as they gamble over his clothes.

It's callous and it's brutal, but he doesn't respond in kind. He's soft-hearted, isn't he? He's loving to the people around him. Who is around him?

Well, right here, most prominently, of course, there are some women. His mother, his mother's sister. Mary, the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. Most of the men have run for their lives.

[18 : 24] And John points out here that the ones who are still standing near to Jesus at the cross are his women disciples. Such a clear focus on their loyalty and courage here.

Jesus didn't want women to know their place or sit quietly in the corner. His women disciples are strong, bold women who really annoy the bad guys. And Jesus looks at them with great love and affection.

And he looks at his mother with such a depth of love, seeing her fears and sorrows. He looks at you with the same depth of love, seeing your fears and sorrows.

And saying, let me shelter you in my love under my mighty loving care. Because when we shelter in his love, we're given the peace, the rest, the space, the confidence, the security that allows us to flourish as human beings.

We see all this so clearly if we read the crucifixion story. That Jesus loves all of us. Because at the cross, he shows love to his killers.

[19 : 38] Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. At the cross, he shows love to his fellow sufferers, to those who have been crucified alongside them.

To one of them, he says, today you will be with me in paradise. And now he shows love to his mother. Such incredible compassion. Making sure that she is a home, a future, a place where she'll be cared for, where there'll be nurture and provision for all her needs.

Girl, Mary, the mother of Jesus. When she was told that she was going to bear God's son, she was told this, a sword will pierce your soul also.

Being the mother of Jesus is an incredible privilege. But that loving relationship comes at incredible cost. Think of it.

You know, I did a funeral for a friend last year who died prematurely. His mum is at the crematorium saying to me, this is wrong.

[20 : 55] No mother should have to bury her son. We all get that, that agony. And that's Mary's agony now.

She endured a scandalous pregnancy to bring Jesus into the world. She went through the pain of liver, of delivery, of labour to deliver him into this world. She kept him safe as an infant by running for the border and becoming a refugee in Egypt so that he wouldn't be killed by King Herod.

This is Mary who taught Jesus his letters and his words, who held his hands and taught him to walk. This is Mary who taught Jesus about his faith, about the scriptures, about his unique place and God's purposes.

This is Mary who watched him grow up as a teenager and into a young man, who saw him breaking taboos, disturbing the peace, crying out for justice and offending the establishment.

This is Mary who feared for her son as she saw him hounded and hunted. This is Mary who has watched him now put on trial, condemned to death, nailed to the tree and mocked as he dies.

[22 : 12] This is her boy, her beloved boy. She loves him with a mother's heart and he loves her with a son's love.

This is his mother, his beloved mother. So of course he reaches out to her to provide for her.

But you know the amazing truth? He loves all of us. You're just as precious to him as his mother. His heart is melted by love for Mary, his mother, and his heart is melted by love for you.

He'll care for you just as he cares for her. His vision for this world is a vision of radical, selfless love.

And it's a vision that includes you. It has a place for you, a shelter and a home for you. So what about us personally then? I just want to say there should be a new vision that we have for how we can be as human beings in this world.

[23 : 22] Get a new vision for our lives. Isn't that a good idea? To change, to become different. If we're going to follow Jesus, then we're going to be one of those people who's called to lay everything on the line for him.

Jesus would ask us to give up career for him, perhaps. To give up reputation for him. To give up power.

Jesus would ask us to prioritize the needs of the stigmatized, the lonely, the homeless, the despised. To set aside power and to serve the powerless.

With Jesus, the way down is the way up. The Apostle Paul, I was reading 1 Corinthians 4 in the New Testament this week, and the Apostle Paul was an incredibly privileged and talented and gifted man.

Very prestigious life that was in front of him. This is what he says about what he chose instead of that life. By choosing Jesus' vision for the future instead of following his own path.

[24 : 32] He says, it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession like the condemned to die in the arena. We've been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as human beings.

To this very hour, we go hungry and thirsty. We are in rags. We are brutally treated. We are homeless.

We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure it. When we are slandered, we answer kindly.

We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world, right up to this moment.

That's the cost there is in following a vision for this better future rooted in the love of Jesus Christ.

[25 : 34] Because it resists the systems of this world and the values of this world and the preferences, then often it brings a cost.

The book I was reading recently, A Gentleman in Moscow, I read it in Holiday in Arkham last week, it's about a Russian nobleman just after the Bolshevik Revolution.

He's in Moscow and he's a nobleman, but he's got good revolutionary credentials. But he's still a bit suspect. So he's put on trial and they don't execute him, but they condemn him to stay in the hotel where he lives for the rest of his life.

He's under house arrest. If he leaves the hotel, he will be executed. And so for the rest of his life, he only leaves that hotel once.

When a child that he's been asked to care for and he's come to love deeply is critically injured in a fall and he rushes her to the hospital and in doing so risks death for someone else's child.

[26 : 42] It's a selfless act. Could have been a really costly act. Dying to self is costly. And it's hard to love in this way because with great love, as we see here in John 19, comes great pain.

C.S. Lewis, who wrote the Narnia Chronicles and so on, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, he said this. He said, There is no safe investment.

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal.

Wrap it up carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness.

But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. Your heart will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

[28 : 05] The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven where we can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell.

Loving is costly. Selfless love for those who don't deserve it, even more costly. We can't bear that cost alone. We need Jesus.

The amount of love this world needs is superhuman, beyond human. So we need the real living God to break through our numbness, to break through our deadness, to break through our moral and spiritual apathy, and to connect our hearts to his heart and the power of his love.

To allow us to live in the shelter of his love and fill us with that love so that we will love the lowest and the least and the last. So that through our love and the love of Cornerstone and the love of Christians in Edinburgh, the unwanted become the wanted, the unlovely become the beautiful of this earth, the homeless find a home, the lost are brought back, the lonely find friends, the sad find joy.

I'm sure that probably is the world you seek. A world of the brotherhood of man and the well-being of others.

[29 : 37] But perhaps you don't see why we need Jesus. And what I'm trying to say is that the love that this world needs, it's found in Jesus.

He's its root, its source, its power. It's the cross that conquers the darkness. It's the cross that reconnects us to the love of God.

If we're looking for the brotherhood of man and for the selfless love that we've described here, and we want it without Jesus, then what we are asking for is the kingdom without the king.

The fruits of Christianity without the roots of Christianity. Because it's the power of the cross that we need. John Lennon used to sing, all you need is love.

And then he also used to sing, imagine there's no religion. So let me utter the heresy perhaps that John Lennon could have been mistaken.

[30 : 37] That we do need Jesus if all we need is love. Let me leave you with that thought. Let's pray that we'll know that love personally.

God, we don't just want to talk about this, we want to taste it. We want to know what it is ourselves to be loved in such an incredible, profound, comforting, and fulfilling way.

May the love of the cross be real and near to each of us today.

May it draw us into your loving presence, into your great and unspeakable peace. And may, as we come to know and experience your love more and more, may we become much more loving to those who are near and dear to us, but also to those who are strangers to us, but need to be cared for.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.