

## Like god, like people

We heard in the 1980s a most remarkable story about the coming of the gospel of Jesus to tribes in what was then Irian Jaya – now West Papua.

When missionaries started telling them the story of Jesus, the missionaries didn't know that in these communities the greatest virtue was not love or self-sacrifice. The greatest virtue was treachery. Betrayal. Why? Why treachery, when almost every other culture despises treachery.

It was because this is how their gods were thought to behave. They lived in fear of their gods because of their power. But they also lived in fear of them because they could never be trusted. Indeed these people had come to believe that not being trusted was god-like. Treachery was to be admired. Betrayal was held up as glorious. The more devious the better.

So, of course, when they first heard the story of Jesus, who do you think they thought the hero was? Yes, Judas Iscariot.

Now eventually in God's mercy the truth did break through to them. Today those once treacherous communities, infamous for their complete lack of truthfulness, are our brothers and sisters in the faith. They now love and serve Jesus and others in faithfulness and truth.

But their story is a clear reminder that inevitably humans become like the gods they worship.

That is true of Christianity as well. Indeed, it's the fact that we are expected, no, commanded, to become like God in our characters. So, are we? When people look at us do they see God-like characters?

This essential connection comes out so clearly in that epistle reading for today from the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of the apostle John.

## Like god, like people

He argues the case by taking us to three Bible truths about God:

**The foundation of love**

**The shape of love**

**The requirement of love**

1. Our God is the very foundation of love

Listen again to how he speaks of God:

Verse 7: *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.*<sup>1</sup>

Verse 8: *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love*<sup>2</sup>

Verse 16: God is love

Two very strong points are being made here:

Firstly, that God is in his very self, love. NB He's not saying that love is God, but that at the very core of God's being is love – absolute focus on the other – always concerned for others. At the very heart of God's nature as the Holy Trinity is the way the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is their love of each other. Jesus says, "My Father loves me and has given all things into my hands" "The Father loves me and I love the Father".

Let me assure you that there is no other religion where this is true. The very best of them have a god who is solitary. Alone. Does not relate. But

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<sup>1</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

## Like god, like people

God is love. And because that love is essentially other person centred, we also read: “love comes from God” (verse 7).

He is the source of love.

Our God is the very foundation of Love.

Fine words, but what does it mean? How do we know what love is? What does John have in mind?

We are not left to kind of fill in the blanks. We read much here of:

### 2. The shape of God's love

Listen again to verses 9 and 10:

*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.<sup>3</sup>*

Here is the very core of what love is.

To speak of the love of God is to speak of him doing something.

And what a thing he has done!

It's like that most surprising and famous of all sentences in the Bible: John's gospel chapter 3 and verse 16:

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<sup>3</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:9–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

## Like god, like people

*“God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*

Think of the world into which God sent his Son. A world which wants to go its own way. Thumbing its nose at God. Really wanting nothing to do with him. Seeing how close to the wind we can sail when we know what he commands us to do. Putting him in the little box called religion. Not living as we were created but hiding our selfishness as a community and as individuals with a bit of Christian paint. Ruining his good and wonderful creation. Ruining the lives of others with our immoralities, our lying, our cheating, our anger, our jealousy – in short living as though we are God.

But, because God is actually God, there's hell to pay for this kind of treatment of our creator.

So, where's the love?

*John says: This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.* It implies what we find stated in other parts of the Bible, that by nature we are the walking dead.

But God has done the unthinkable. Instead of condemnation we find love.

Instead of judgement we find a sacrifice which brings peace between God and us. Reconciles him to us and us to him.

God didn't have to do this – yet here is the great defining moment when “Love came to town”. We remember this of course every time we celebrate the Holy Communion. In wonder we hear that in the face of our

## Like god, like people

deserving God to cut us off, to expose our shamefacedness, he sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. In his body broken and his blood flowing on the cross back then is the death that we deserve for our treatment of our infinitely good God. Here is an act of the utmost selflessness, the utmost other person centredness, defining in a whole new way what love is.

But did you also notice how unexpected the impact of this love upon us is to be?

There is indeed a:

### 3. Requirement of love from God himself.

We would (rightly, I think) expect to read something like this: “This is how God loved us. Let’s love him as much as we possibly can.”

While that is true, that’s not what we find here.

Listen again to verse 11: *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*<sup>4</sup>

Or verses 19 to 21:

<sup>19</sup> *We love because he first loved us.* <sup>20</sup> *Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not*

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<sup>4</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

## Like god, like people

*seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.<sup>5</sup>*

Look around you. Go on, look at one another. Take your time.

If you and I claim to love God because he has loved us, our love for him must show itself, MUST show itself in love for the ones we see here today. It must!

And so it will be that God's nature will be seen in the way you and I love one another like God loved us.

It will truly be:

Like God, like people

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<sup>5</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 4:19–21). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.