



PRAYER: Pray for any personal needs of your group, church, community, etc.

NOTE: Our insights are important so remember to respect each other's thoughts/reflections.

DISCUSSION:

We discussed the need to perceive, receive and achieve God's agape love if we're to be an authentic and safe expression of God's church.

- Share what it means for you to PERCEIVE the love you've received in Christ – then what it means for you to RECEIVE this love from God – then what steps you've felt (and continue to feel) are needed to ACHIEVE a close walk with Christ and be an expression of Agape love in the world around you.

READ: John 18.33-37 (Discuss as many or as few of the following questions as you wish)

Before we begin the season of Advent, we first celebrate the Feast of Christ the King which began in 1925. It began in response to the perception of growing secularism. Its purpose is to remind us of two points:

1. Christ is our Redeemer and purchased us "with a great price" which made us members of God's family.
2. God bestowed upon Christ the nations of the world. All power in heaven and on earth is given to him.

Before we celebrate Jesus the baby, we're reminded of the King to whom angels and humanity bows. This is a great reminder before Christmas – God's value towards gift giving wasn't the worldly but the spiritual.

- Why do you think Pilate asked Jesus if he was King of the Jews? What do you make of his response?
- Jesus refers to his Kingdom as being very different to the worlds. What significant differences could you list as opposite to Jesus? E.g. Worldly kingdom = gaining riches/power, Jesus kingdom = giving to those in need/character of vulnerability.
- Jesus equates the building of his kingdom and purpose for being born as a King, with testifying to THE TRUTH and building a community of those who seek this TRUTH. Discuss what this means.

Pray for the following areas of our church:

- **CHURCH FUNCTIONS:** Retirement Village craft stall for fundraising, Christmas Services at Mango Hill
- **OTHER CHURCHES:** pray for DOWNPOUR, AXIS, ST BENEDICTS & NEW BEGINNINGS BAPTIST
- **LIFE GROUPS:** pray for the other LIFE groups we have, for new homes to be offered so more groups can begin and a coordinator/s to step forward to help facilitate growing the LIFE group ministries.
- **VISION 2021** – refer your VISION 2021 and please choose another area to pray for

AGAPE – Love (1 John 4.7-13 - Mark 12.28-34)

Last week we looked at the Hebrew word AHAVA and wrestled with asking:

- Why do we so place God's love to the side when life gets busy?
- Do we understand God's love when we use love so generically?
- Can we offer God's inclusive love, if we haven't wrestled with wanting to exclude others?

Ahava love, we found, *intentionally* chooses to love beyond personal comfort and feelings.

In the Greek language/culture, there is a number of expressions/contexts for love

- Eros is sexual or passionate love
- Philia is friendship, is shared goodwill
- Storge ('store-gae'), or familial love, the love of parents to their children
- Ludus is playful or uncommitted love
- Pragma is a kind of practical love based on reason, duty and one's longer-term interests
- Philautia is self-love, which can be healthy or unhealthy
- Agape is the love for strangers, nature, or God

Agape love is about how we:

- **perceive** empathic love offered by God through Jesus,
- **receive** and embrace this love as integral to our identity
- and **achieve** implementing the offering of this love

Agape love is an unending cycle of love - flowing from the well of Jesus Christ, into us and out to others - it is why C.S. Lewis called it "gift love," and it is the highest form of Christian love

SHOW VIDEO

A recent report by the Scanlon Foundation highlights some interesting statistics:

- Racial and religious discrimination is at its highest level since surveys began in 2007
- There is growing anti-asylum seeker sentiment
- Australians social trust of fellow citizens declined from 52% in 2012 to 45% in 2013.

Perhaps you see/hear and feel what seems to be the reality of Australian community:

- communities are fracturing
- social cohesion is being eroded
- caught up in a culture of hyper-individualism

Social philosopher and writing for the guardian, Roman Krznaric (kraz-ner-ic) says:

Although the neuroscientists now tell us that 98% of people have the ability to empathise, the reality is that we lead busy, stressful lives, and often feel we don't have the time or energy to step into other people's shoes, look at the world from their perspective – and give them some support. In other words, we fail to bring our neural circuitry to life, so our empathic potential lies dormant.

Studies on empathy decline in the US found empathy had dropped 48% over the last 40 years.

As products of society, maybe you are like me - we know what we've been taught – but extending Agape love seems to be becoming harder

Though we can give practically and financially *in the moment*, the ability to perceive, receive and achieve, offering Agape love to build value and dignity in others for longer periods is too hard

When the church fails in this way – we become inward looking, tired, stagnate, form cliques

However, when we're intentional, we offer beauty, safety, support and care when we're focused to be an empathic, sacrificial, agape church community – *that's what we aim to be as a church isn't it?*

So, here's a thought – are pastors needed and what do we do?

I mean - if a church was all about *agape love* – would there even be a need for a priest?

In countries with under-ground house churches like China, they have often thrived

Many of these places *don't* have a defined head pastor – just the church focused on agape.

Now, there are persecuted churches where the church ceased.

Marc Cortez is a theology professor and Dean at Western Seminary who discusses Christian leaders in Slovakia where the church is still recovering from decades of communist rule.

During that time, the Christians in Slovakia were committed yet as one Slovak leader said, 1,200 years of Christian culture was largely lost in *just two generations*.

What made the difference *seems to be the degree of intentionality - of the church community -* how each member chose to **perceive, receive and achieve**, offering God's Agape love

What's fascinating is Krznaric wants an empathy revolution in Australia - he says the good news is:

Neuroscientists have discovered we have a ten-section "empathy-circuit" wired into us

Psychologists believe the empathic ability develops in most children by the age of two.

The problem - we're still not very skilled at tapping into our full empathic potential.

The solution – empathy can be learned so it needs to be *reflected on, role-modelled and discussed*

The program - *Roots of Empathy*.

A class of kids adopts a baby for a year – the parent visits every few weeks. The children sit around the baby and think about: why's the baby crying – laughing - feeling? Stepping into the baby's shoes. Then they extended this discussion outward.

What's it like to be bullied in the playground, or to be made fun of if you're in a wheelchair?

This is a great idea – you know what - God came up with a program also

The problem – we're not skilled at tapping into love and empathy

The solution – send someone to model and discuss the greatest expression of love – to show how truly valuable it is by laying down their lives for it – then leave a helper for support

The program - God's Church

God gave us his Spirit to be an inter-generational community who support and nurture each other – to raise new leaders with gifts to teach us how to serve others - through God's agape love

It isn't difficult to be a revolutionary church community – it's why you don't really need me

However, God calls me, and you and all leaders to *remind and teach* each other *why and how* we are to keep making that constant decision to invest in agape

The formula is simple - if we *know God*, have been born of God, it must lead us to a love of others.

Have you **perceived** the love of God seen in Jesus life?

Have you **received** the love Jesus offered on the cross?

Do you want to **achieve** in growing an agape love?

Let's not try to start a *new empathy revolution* so much as perceive, receive and achieve the one God gave our world through Jesus – all it takes is you as God's people to be an agape community.

While we work out how to keep doing that, I might just stick around for a little longer

Let's pause for a moment of silent prayer ...