

Advent-ually #1 – Longing for love

I **really love**... watching big sporting events.

But, before you switch off because sport's not your thing, please complete this sentence for yourself!

Fill in the blank for yourself after saying, "I really love... _____"

People of Argentina must **really love** Diego Maradona.

Look at the outpouring of grief on the streets in Buenos Aires and Naples this week from tens of thousands of people who never knew him but adored him (he died at age 60 from a heart attack this week).



The football legend known as the "hand of God" was raised in a poor family in a shantytown on the southern outskirts of the capital city of Argentina. Maradona went on to become that nation's most divine citizen.



His extraordinary talent for the world game became the nation's pride, his 2 goals in the 1986 World Cup was regarded as a political, spiritual victory for Argentina over England.



These people really must love Maradona.

It shows.

What, or who is it that you would say, you **really love**? What makes it show? What displays that you **really** love that person or that thing?

I have a friend who says he **really** loves his **dog**.

He's always going on about how much **he loves that dog**. Recently the dog needed surgery, and cost was \$7000. \$7000 he spent! On a dog! He must **really** love that dog.

What do you **really** love? What **shows** it?

We recognise great love through **devotion** and **sacrifice**. Some people have asked me during this pandemic (knowing I'm a priest), "Does God **really** love us?"

Well, does God **really** love us? For two millennia the Church has pointed to God's devotion and sacrifice in the **cross of Christ** as a clear and satisfying response to such a question. In the Gospel of John chapter 3, perhaps the most concise summary of God's love for us in the Bible says...

John 3¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.
¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

There's something helpfully ambiguous about verse 16...

- On the one hand we can read it as "For God **so** loved the world...", emphasising the **means** and **manner** of such love. In the preceding verses¹ we hear how Moses lifted up a serpent on a pole before the people of God as that place to look with faith for healing and salvation. John links it to the "lifting up" of Jesus on the cross in verses 16 and 17 as that place to look with faith for God's love to be healed and saved eternally.²
- On the other hand, we can also read verse 16 as "God **so** loved the world..." with our emphasis on the **motive** and **devotion** of God. In this reading the **heart** of God's love is in view – that God would sacrifice so much in such an extravagant and costly act as the cross for ones like you and me so undeserving.

Other passages from the New Testament reflect the latter emphasis on our reading of John 3:16. For example, in 1 John 4 we read...

9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

¹ John 3:14,15

² Numbers 21:8

Again, in Romans 8 we read...

32 God who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God not with him also give us everything else?

This love of Christ, Paul goes on to write, is so strong, nothing in heaven or earth can ever separate those of faith with the God who so loved them (Rom. 8:37-39).

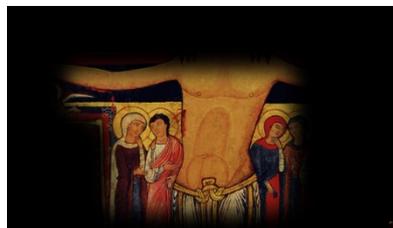
Does God *really* love us? What shows this love to us?

A 14th century monk announced to the people of his village that he was going to **preach the greatest sermon ever preached on the love of God.**

He urged everyone to attend. At the appropriate hour, the cathedral filled with young and old alike. Throughout the service, everyone anticipated the monk's great discourse. However, when it was time for his sermon, the monk did not enter the pulpit.

Instead, he went to the candelabra, drew a **long burning candle** from its stand, and walked to the highest part of the sanctuary where there hung a sculptured form of Christ nailed to the cross.

The monk silently lifted the **candle** until the glow of its flame rested just below one of Christ's **pierced hands**. He held the candle there with his back to the congregation. Then, shifting his weight, he moved the candle below Jesus' **other pierced hand**.



Slowly he moved the candle to **Christ's side** where the spear had pierced it.

Finally, the monk dropped to his knees in prayer, holding the glimmering light so that the glow fell on

Christ's nail-pierced feet.

After a moment, the monk stood up and turned toward the people.

Holding the candle before him so that the people



could see the gentle tears on his face, he said, “My beloved people---**this is my sermon** on the love of God for you.”

And he dismissed them with a benediction!

What shows that God *really* loves the people of the world? The Christian faith points to the **shape of a cross** and story of Jesus’ death for sin upon such an ancient instrument of shame, suffering and death.

The **vertical beam** speaks of that love that has “come down” from heaven to us as God took on our humanity to address our deepest need.

C. S. Lewis captured this love in the cross of Christ in a **poem**:

"Love's as hard as nails, love is nails: blunt, thick, hammered through the medial nerves of One who, having made us, knew the thing He had done, seeing (with all that is) our cross, and His."



The **horizontal beam** signifies the love poured out in us that we now share one-to-another in the power of God’s Spirit to continue showing the world that God *really* loves us.

Tertullian, a 2nd Century African scholar, reported that the Romans of his day would exclaim about Christians, "See how they **love** one another"

Justin Martyr, a Greek-speaking apologist of the same Century in Italy, sketched Christian love this way: "We who used to value... wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies."

Scholars talk of Jesus at his birth as **God Incarnate**. And in the cross we can also speak of “**love incarnate**” – God’s love for us, **in-person, in the flesh**.

The 1st Letter of John puts it this way...

“See what love (God) the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are... This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:7-10 NRSV)

The Apostle Paul wrote it like this,

"God **proves his love** for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Rom 5:8-10 NRSV).

Perhaps this Advent, you will meet with people who have this question, “Does God really love us?” Along with Christians of every age, we still point to the devotion and sacrifice of God evident in the sending of Jesus into the world to be the loving sacrifice that addresses our deepest need of being saved from sin and from death and to unite us with God in peace.

The Bible tells us that God **really** loves us.

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