

THERFIELD CHAPEL CAROL SERVICE

21st December 2003

loveactually

“General opinion’s starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed – but I don’t see that – seems to me that love is everywhere:

igniting laughter, wreaking havoc, breaking hearts, daring commitments, forcing choices, catapulting spirits, forging inroads, creating risks – ecstatic, exciting, unexpected, unwelcome, inconvenient, inexplicable, inelegant, unequalled.

Love actually *is* all around.”

So opens the hit romantic comedy film, **loveactually**; skipping quickly from pictures of terrorist atrocities to a series of emotional reunions at Heathrow airport as people of all shapes, sizes, colours and ages are re-united with their loved ones after who knows how long.

And on the face of it, the film does live up to its billing as a feel-good Christmas movie, as the main characters all find love, through a wide variety of situations cleverly woven together as the film progresses. Far be it from me to knock it.

But I can’t help but contrast the portrayal of love in this film to the portrayal of love in the real Christmas story.

Look at it little closer, and you find that the film love is a faint and sometimes distorted shadow of the real thing. You could write off some of the love as infatuation, fantasy, or even just plain lust. Yet the appeal of this film and its genre endures: which is the notion that each of us, no matter what our appearance, status, or background, can find true love.

So the conclusion must be that the desire for love is a genuine core part of what it is to be human; and the let-down is that in real life so many find what passes for love but not the real thing. For powerful though the romantic love that attracts two people to each other may be, such love is *not* the greatest love which our hearts desire, and even in its most perfect form is but a faint and distorted shadow of the real thing.

Yet the search for true love need not be a fruitless one - in fact the clues are all around us, particularly at this time of year.

Sometimes the evidence of two people’s love for each other is a baby, a new and perfect little person, who owes his or her very existence to the love of mother for father. Though our fast-moving culture can make it difficult to see, there is tremendous significance and hope to the arrival of the first progeny, the start of a new generation, another person to take their place in the long family line stretching back into the mists of time, and we hope, forward beyond what we can see or imagine.

No baby was ever such an expression of love, or represented such a significant hope, as the one born in a manger in Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

Why was this baby so special? To look at, he was no different to any other baby born in that part of the world; but unlike any other, he had not been called into existence by his mother and father's love. Yet this was no loveless child; in fact, this was love in human form.

This was the Son of God, born as a man. But what does this mean? It's easy to sing such words as "Son of God, love's pure light"; but have you ever stopped to think what it means?

You see, Jesus existed long before Mary gave birth to that baby boy. In fact, he existed long before anything else – that's what we read at the very start of the service from John 1, where Jesus is described as the Word. The Word, the Son of God, what's the connection? Well, at one level it is impossible to understand, for it goes to the very heart of the nature of God, and we can no more comprehend that than a dust mite can comprehend us.

The only hope we have of gaining some understanding is if God chooses to reveal it to us; and that is precisely what he does through Jesus Christ.

First, he is the Son of God. Here God is using a metaphor to help us to understand a deep truth, and like all metaphors it can be stretched too far. The point is that the relationship between God the Father and Jesus his son is *like* the relationship between a man and his son. It is a relationship of love, of common characteristics, through the shared genetic makeup, and of an unbreakable connection. The Father/Son love is different to husband/wife love, which is a love between two entirely different people, not just male and female but also different characters, traits, and genetic code, and sadly a relationship which can be broken. But a Father's son is always the father's son. And it is the Father/Son relationship which God uses to describe the relationship between these two members of the trinity.

Then he uses another metaphor, the Word of God. As The Word, he is God's revelation of himself to us in a way that we can understand.

In **love**actually, one of the characters, Mark, is hopelessly in love with his best friend's new wife. She doesn't realise, until she makes him show his personal video of their wedding, which is all pictures of her and none of the groom. But he is too embarrassed to say anything to her. Eventually, he plucks up the courage to tell her how he has felt – not to break up her marriage, but to face the issue and then move on. To do this without alerting the husband, he pretends to be a carol singer at the door, and as the music plays, he shows her some large flash-cards with his message written on it.

That is how he revealed his true feelings for her, with clear, unambiguous words.

So Jesus is the way in which God reveals his true feelings for us: not simply by his words, but by all that he is, and does. Jesus *is* the revelation of God, the Word of God.

And at Christmas time we celebrate the start of that great revelation. The One through whom all things were made, the one who is loved by God with the deep and unbreakable love of a Father for a Son, is presented to His creation in the form of a human baby.

What can we make of God's feelings for us, when he gave such a precious gift into our world?

It is amazing that God should have entered into his world in his way. He could have come as a fully grown man, strong and self-sufficient from the outset, bursting onto the scene of history and getting straight into his ministry. But instead he came in the same way that everyone enters the world, as a baby, weak, vulnerable and totally dependent on others for his survival; and spent his first 30 years in obscurity, living amongst ordinary people, doing ordinary things, like a sleeper agent waiting for his time.

For this was no casual visit of God to man; this was no passing flirtation with his creation; he came as one of us, on a special mission so astounding that no-one understood what it was, even though all the key details were already spelled out through the Old Testament prophets.

For all the ordinariness and even lowliness of the scene of his birth, the event does not go unmarked. Like a proud father, God wants to show off his son to those around; and his choice of guest is most revealing. Not the high and mighty from Jerusalem or even Bethlehem society, but the poor and lowly, the shepherds on the night shift out in the fields. To them he sends a celestial choir of angels, who are very excited about the new birth. The shepherds in turn get caught up with that excitement, and forgetting everything else they rush off to see "what had come to pass".

Others too realise the deep significance of the event – wise men from the east, who know how to interpret the unusual star which has appeared, hailing the birth of a new King. And so, at great personal risk and expense, they set out on their journey which may have taken as long as three years, just to spend a few moments with this new King, and to offer him their gifts.

Meanwhile Mary pondered these things in her heart. She knew that God had not sent his son as a baby just to be cooched at, whether by shepherds or wise men. God would not pull such a stunt just for the feel-good factor that the new baby brought. Every mother wonders what sort of person their child will become, what their life will be like, what they will do. Mary especially must have wondered this, knowing as she did the miraculous nature of her little son.

Given that Jesus was not a new creation in Mary's arms, the sort of person he would become was not in doubt: he would be the most godly person going, for he is God.

What was to be surprising was what this meant, as God rubbed shoulders with man in man's world. Some imagine of God as someone quite aloof, glorious for sure, but unapproachable in his holiness. Some confuse holiness with austerity, imagining God to frown on anything that is fun, indeed to be a divine spoil-sport.

And some conclude that God does not care about the mundane issues in our mundane lives; he may be concerned with large matters like the fate of the universe, but he has no time for the *smaller* less important things with which we spend our time.

Read further into these Gospels, and you will be amazed at what you see. You will see a man so holy that sinners, even drunkards and prostitutes, flock to him, not because he is like them, not because like some liberal vote-seeking politician he supports their alternative lifestyle; but because he loves them with a love so pure and deep that he seeks to make their lives whole again.

You will see a man so focused on the mission that he came into our world for, that he always has time to stop and talk to the wretched beggar at the side of the road; a man with a message of such utter importance for mankind that he interrupts his discourses to let little children come to him and share with him the simple things in life which excite them.

A man who demonstrates such complete control over all the created realm and over death itself, that he allows himself to be nailed to a cross of wood, and to die.

For the special mission which he came on was not to be hailed as a hero, but to be pay the price for all our wrong-doing by dying for us.

This is the revelation of what God feels for us!

This is the love that is actually all around us: no fickle love which is here today and gone tomorrow; no selfish love, in it for what he can receive rather than what he can give; no shallow love which has limits to how far it will go. But such a strong, deep, self-giving self-sacrificing love that you could never in your wildest dreams imagine is there for you.

And yet when you do see it you will realise that it is just the sort of love that, deep down, you have been seeking all your life.

And it is here for you, this Christmas time, and for ever. If only like the shepherds you will turn from the previously important tasks of life to come and worship Christ. If only like the wise men you will seek Christ out no matter what the cost. If only, like the drunkards and prostitutes, you will come to Christ for a new start. If only, like the little children, you will come to Christ with an open heart.

That is God's word to us: he is love, actually.