Back in 2016, Chris Sheldrick, a music industry professional was getting fed up with kit for his concerts and productions forever getting lost in transit. Postcodes often didn't work when you were setting up in fields. On one notorious occasion sound equipment was delivered to the wrong wedding reception. So Chris sat down with his mathematician school friend, Mohan Ganesalingam, to find a way to describe location that would be as precise as GPS coordinates, but easier for people to use. What they came up was a simple system called 'what3words' – 3 random words that divided the world into tiny squares 3m wide by 3m long and created a unique 3-word name for it.

What's the point of that, you might ask? Well it's not just getting music equipment to wedding receptions. Any serious walker or traveller has this app on their phones now – if you get lost or have an accident, you just send your 3-word location and a rescue team can pinpoint your location *exactly*, and not have to comb a mile of wilderness trying to find you. It literally saves lives.

So after the service, have a look on what3words.com to find out your exact location. It's actually a lot of fun – one end of your house will probably be different to the other end, but the map is so precise you can do that. When I checked my house, the first location was 'sling crisis notes' which felt quite appropriate to my morning sermon prep – but actually that was my next door neighbour's garden. So I moved the cursor and where I am actually sitting now is 'dirt harsh bump' – I'll leave you to decide if that's a fair reflection of today's sermon – or indeed any of my others.

The world defined in 3 unique words. It's something we do quite often: think of 'Hands Face Space', or – dare I say it after last week's low-key ending – 'Line of Duty'. But today we come across 3 unique words which really did define the world. The bible is a million words long in English and took 1,500 years to write. But here in this passage – almost the last to be written in the story of scripture – all of that wisdom, all of that revelation is condensed into **3 words which are the heart of all wisdom and knowledge, the heart of life itself: God is love.**

We live in a pluralised world, full of ideas about the meaning of life and the nature of spiritual things. But here we get to the very essence, something we can build a whole view of life around which actually works: God is love. Yes, God may be all kinds of other things as well, but his heart, his defining essence is simply this – love.

But let's be clear as to what kind of love we are talking about. It's not romantic love, or patriotic loyalty or even based around things that we like or enjoy – though it can include bits of all of those. It is bigger and deeper than that. It is **love defined as selfless giving**.

This is important because this passage is not just one of the most profound in all scripture, but also one of the most misquoted. We use it at the beginning of a marriage service and most people who are sitting in the congregation think it's about romantic love – but it isn't. It's been used by countless hippies and new agers to bolster some theory about self-love or free love or some other form of liberation ('love is all you need') – but it isn't about that either.

It's been used by secularisers to show that what you believe doesn't really matter as long as we 'love' – but that's missing the point too. In fact John says that quite clearly just the verse before: 'if anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.'

To really understand what John is saying, <u>we have to follow the sequence</u>. John starts by saying in v7: 'love comes from God.' That makes obvious sense – if God is self-giving love, then this kind of love comes from God. In fact, God showed this very clearly in v9: '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.'

So this kind of love is Christ-centred. It is also Christ initiated: 'This is love,' John says in v10, 'not that we loved God but that he loved us.' So often we start from human images of love and work back to God. But the deepest form of love comes from God, and we can only truly find it in him. *God loved before we did* – and as we receive this divine kind of love, then we find capacity to share that love with others. <u>As we receive, so we give</u> – otherwise the well runs dry.

This is why we have to centre ourselves in Christ, the heart of God's self-giving love – as we do that, so his love fills us, and flows out of us into others: v17 'This is how love is made complete among us... in this world we are like Jesus.' And John has one last pearl to offer – if we abide in this kind of love, **the power of fear in our life is reduced**.

Some forms of fear are good – as humans, we need to recognise threats and avoid them, that's a basic biological instinct. But fear when not in crisis mode makes bad decisions. If we make our life choices based on fear, we get ourselves into trouble. There are four basic fears and I guarantee that at least one of them will act as a subconscious driver in your life: fear of failure or being wrong; fear of being insignificant or losing; fear of not being liked; fear of not being needed. In certain situations, that fear will press your buttons, and will drive you to make certain choices.

But John says in v18: **'there is no fear in divine love – perfect love drives out fear.'** To abide in this healing, cleansing, divine love helps us to live through that same love, and not the fears that whisper in our ear. We no longer need to be right, or important, or liked, or needed. We can simply give ourselves in love, as our Lord directs.

So as we drink deep of this astonishing teaching, let's make sure to hear what John really means by it – and let's invite this awesome, self-giving divine love, this love of Christ, to enter our lives afresh and make us whole. 'Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in them.' Amen.