

## Sermon for 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany (30<sup>th</sup> January 2022) - 1 Corinthians 13 - Love!

(James Parsons, Reader)

If you have a close look at my Bible, there's something you may notice about the pages at today's reading from 1 Corinthians. They are amongst the grubbier pages in my Bible! There is an accumulation of finger and thumb prints from over the years, (since Julia bought me the Bible as an engagement present - 38 years ago tomorrow!); to a forensic analyst these and other pages (many with few, if any finger or thumb prints) would probably reveal my Bible reading habits.

1 Corinthians 13 is often known as the love chapter. For many people it is known mainly through being read at weddings. And indeed, this 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Corinthians was one of the Bible passages read at our daughter's wedding just over two years ago. It was also one of the Bible passages my mother had chosen for her funeral nearly two years ago; but that's a different story - perhaps for a different occasion.

Although Paul, the writer of this letter, didn't have weddings in mind when he wrote this passage, it, especially verses 4 to 7, does though still form the basis of excellent instruction or guidance to the wedding couple about love in their relationship.

And in case you are wondering, I'm not talking about, and neither is Paul writing here about romantic or sexual love. That would be the Greek word *eros*, from which we get the English word erotic. This Greek word doesn't even appear in the NT (nor the OT, but that was written in Hebrew!). There is however erotic literature in the Bible, the Song of Solomon, for example.

I'm not a Greek scholar - apart from the occasional Greek letter in some of the engineering formulae I use at work, most of my recent Greek is associated with names of Covid-19 variants. But I know that there are at least four Greek words that are translated into English as love.

An issue with our English language is that words, like love, have many different meanings. For example, I could say, "I love red wine." I say to Julia, although probably not frequently enough, "I love you." Obviously, the love I have for red wine is not the same love I have for Julia.

Though the various Greek words for love are all translated to the same English word, in most instances, they held different meanings for the Greek-speaking readers. To the Greeks, *agape* meant a general empathy or loving-kindness for all people. Christians are indeed expected to care for all in the name of Christ; however, the Bible takes it a step further.

*Agape* love, in the Bible, is "love that comes from God (1 Jn 4:7)"; it's part of his character. It comes from an outpouring of who he is. "God is love (1 Jn 4:8)," meaning he is the source of *agape* love. God is the standard for

true *agape*. God's love for us is unconditional, unrelenting, undiminishing. It is sacrificial. It is everlasting. Such love is a great foundation for any relationship, including in a marriage between two people.

But if Paul didn't have marriage in mind when he wrote this passage, what then was its purpose?

A clue is where this passage occurs. It sits between parts of Paul's letter that deal with, on one side, in chapter 12, some teaching about spiritual gifts, those gifts that serve the Christian community (Anna spoke on this two weeks ago). And also, unity within the Christian community as one body, but with many parts, (that David spoke about last week). On the other side, in chapter 14, Paul gives additional instructions on particular spiritual gifts and orderly worship.

Chapter 13 is meant to be read with the parts each side of it, not taken in isolation or out of context. The theory (of chapter 12) is intended to be applied (as in chapter 14) in the light of chapter 13.

Now, you may have heard David say that for us, in the Parish of Tidenham, 2022 is to be the year of community. It is to a community of Christian believers in Corinth that Paul has written this letter; they are there as the body of Christ, exercising spiritual gifts and meeting together to worship. Almost two thousand years on we are here in this Parish as a community of Christian believers, the body of Christ, that exercises spiritual gifts and meets together to worship.

This passage of Scripture, God's word, applies as much to us today as it did for the church in Corinth. Let us then deepen our understanding of the most Christ-like characteristic imaginable: love.

The passage divides into three neat parts.

First, Paul insists, using himself as an example, that everything we do as individual Christians and as a community together, is meaningless without love. Speaking in tongues or languages of any kind (and I guess that includes English) is, without love, just incomprehensible noise. Exercising other spiritual gifts - prophecy, knowledge or great faith - without love is nothing. Giving what we have to the poor, even becoming a martyr for our faith, without love gains us nothing.

What is the motivation for what we do as a Christian community? What do we want to be known for? Is it our worship, our re-ordering projects, our children's and youth work, or even the wellbeing project? Because without love we're just making a noise, we're nothing, we gain nothing. Or is it because we are a community that loves?

What then does Paul mean by love?

The second part of this chapter is the essential part, the nitty-gritty of it. Here, Paul defines Christian love using fifteen verbal phrases, that is, actions, or quality behaviour which it brings about. We could have a sermon series just on these few verses.

A suggestion I once heard is to reread the passage but replace the love with “I”. The exercise can be quite challenging.

I am patient; I am kind; I’m not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. I don’t insist on my own way; I’m not irritable or resentful. I don’t rejoice in wrongdoing but I rejoice in the truth. I bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

Really? I don’t think so!

Or read it again and, instead of “love” ask, “Am I?”. For example, am I patient? Am I kind? And so on.

Perhaps we could ask someone we trust, whether they notice one or two things from these fifteen that might be deficient in some way; all fifteen at once would probably be too much for us to cope with (and unkind!). And as we think and pray about these qualities certain people may come to mind, or situations where we could behave differently. We pray to God who is love and the source of love, and he loves us.

Perhaps even now as I’ve said this someone or an incident has come into your mind.

We might need to pray like this:

Dear God, forgive me for being irritable with *so-and-so (insert name)*. Instead, help me to love *so-and-so (insert name)* by being more tolerant and patient. Amen.

Imagine what our Christian community would be like if we all practiced this? Wow! It would be a loving community that not only we would want to be part of, but also the wider community, our family, friends and neighbours.

Lastly, the third part. Love never fails.

Perhaps this was what my mother was thinking when she chose this passage for her funeral service. Whatever we do in life, or whatever we are known and remembered for during our lives, it is only love that endures for all time. Love is the most excellent way - receiving God’s love and responding to God’s love by loving him and loving one another.

I want to finish by quoting Tom Wright. This fits in well with the vision of our church: to be ‘Living life together in the flow of God’s love.’ We seek to do this in, through and by relationship.

Tom Wright says, “Love is God’s river, flowing on into the future, across the border into the country where there is no pride, no jostling for position, no contention among God’s people. We are invited to step into that river here and now, and let it take us where it’s going.” Amen.