

Being Church Part 3 - 1 Corinthians 13 - The more excellent way

Can you imagine the management sitting in the board room at John Lewis or Marks and Spencers or National Express buses or Rover or Amazon and agreeing together that the way they were going to run the company was from now on going to be based on love? That what would make their business tick was going to be the love that the bosses showed to the employees and the staff to one another and the love they showed to their customers. Love was to be their watch word - and profits, expansion, share in the market, new product design, branding, all was to mean nothing – without love.

But that was the message that Paul was writing to the church in Corinth. This is part 3 of the series Being Church and just in case you haven't picked it up yet – although we have to get organised sometimes and sometimes that's a struggle - the church isn't an organisation like a business or a school or the scouts or the golf club. Instead it's the way God's people relate to each other and flourish together. I said in my first sermon in the series 'the church is God's institution, God's way of being for God's people, it exists in the relationships between the people who gather – because in Christ and by the work of the Holy Spirit we belong to one another.' In Dave's sermon two weeks ago, he described it as an organism – a reproductive life form. That's a good description of the nature of the church – but having thought about what the church is and is not – we need to think about how to be it - and the way to be this strange creature called the church, argues Paul, the way to live within it – the way to enable the church to exist and function - is through love. What will mark it out as different and distinctive is love.

St Paul's beautifully written, poetic words were not written for a wedding. They were not written about marriage. They were not written for Valentine's Day – they were written as the fruit of long experience, they came out of dialogue with ordinary Christians seeking to live out the way of Christ - especially those at Corinth. They were formed out a deep understanding that whatever gifts we have, if they are not used in love – they count for nothing. Whatever service we undertake – if it is not given

in love – it counts for nothing. Even whatever act of martyrdom we endure or put ourselves through for the sake of Christ – if not done in love – it means nothing.

Love is the deal. Paul has described the gifts and ministries God gives us as a body – and then at the end of chapter twelve are these words – but I will show you a more excellent way – and the way is love. It's easy to slip into the trap of using one's gifts for personal glory or seeking adulation or to become a noisy gong – 'shouting one's mouth off' with no substance to what is being said. 'Now't but a rattle' is what they say in Yorkshire. Acts of service can be given freely or given begrudgingly or with an expectation of return, or used to manipulate others' feelings or in duty or in self-righteousness. Self-sacrifice the same. How we handle ourselves, whether we use love in our dealings with others all makes a difference to the effectiveness of what we work to do for God.

And we know what this love looks like because Paul tells us in detail. *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

This is how the Message version puts it.

Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, Trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end.

Notice how love isn't passive – its active. Love as St Paul describes it is an action - not an object or a feeling. This is what love does or - doesn't do. Love is known and shown in concrete actions. Doing words - verbs. To

be patient, to be kind, not to be boastful, not to be arrogant, not to be rude.

This is a tough call. You only have to put one's own name into that passage to see how tough. Olwen is patient.. Olwen is not irritable.... Olwen does not insist on her own way... ugh oh

It maybe a tough call – but living together in this kind of love is the call. This is not a text where we are asked to look on as guests, dressed for a party and seated dutifully in the church pews, as at a wedding – this demands our engagement and involvement – to frame up the kingdom of God – to form it – even in a small way - here and also out in the world. The last two sermons we talked at length about way we are joined to one another whether we like it or not – as a body is made up of different parts all necessary to the functioning of the body. But it is hard to be a community of faith. This is the way to do it.

We might ask – why should I bother? These people are not my blood relations – why should I work at getting on with them? One way to get on is not to engage very much. Then it's easy – because the engagement is polite and in passing and doesn't impact on who we are. The moment we seek to engage at a deeper level – in a group, on a committee, or seek to bring something into being together– there will be tensions. The level of conflict rises – of course it does – but conflict isn't all bad – it can be really constructive. When we can bridge it and work at issues - it brings people into a more connected relationship. And when love is at the centre of who we and what we do as a Christian community then differences can be respected and acknowledged and worked with – because we know that what gives us unity is a radical love. Love isn't about being a mush. Love is about truth and respect as we have heard.

Can we imagine the kind of love that can have the extraordinary power to create and sustain and build Christian unity? Christians and churches are notorious for falling out. Being church is really hard- but remember love was Jesus' message too. Not just Paul's. Jesus said to his disciples *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know*

that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' And he said it after he had kneeled and washed their feet. He had been to them as a servant and when Peter had protested Jesus said unless I wash you, you have no part in me.

To love as Christ loved us – is to be vulnerable. To give and receive love means being vulnerable, and open, it means we can get hurt. But what makes this impossible sounding way of being possible -is the prior experience of the love of Christ for you and for me. We don't love one another as a reciprocal return on another person being kind to us. We love because Christ loved us. Otherwise we can't – we wouldn't have the strength.

Another motivation for love is the value which God has set upon his people. We know each person is a special creation of God. Jesus also taught us to love God and love our neighbour – that is each person – whoever they are – inside and outside the church - especially those we find difficult or who challenge us. If God values them and loves them then we are called to us as well. I have told you before the story of the bath in the house of Mother Theresa and her sisters- the nuns in Calcutta. The bath where they washed the desperate people who were living on the streets- who so often they brought in to their house to tend as they died. Above the bath is a sign which says 'the Body of Christ'. Just as a reminder.

I found this quote: 'Paul's concern was for the growth of love as an attitude and habitual practice for everyday life in Corinth.' Let us pray and work that it should be so for our Christian communities in this parish too.