

Love ?

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O Lord Jesus Christ,
who at your first coming sent your messenger
to prepare the way before you:
grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries
may likewise so prepare and make ready your way
by turning the hearts of the disobedient
to the wisdom of the just,
that at your second coming to judge the world
we may be found an acceptable people in your sight.

Our text may be found in Paul's First letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 4:

'Love is . . .'

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent and a chance to hear our third sponsored sermon this Advent. Today, David Bargioni has asked me to preach on 1 Corinthians 13, Paul writing in praise of love. It's a well known text, a favourite choice at wedding ceremonies, an exploration by Paul of what is at the heart of our faith - **LOVE**.

In this context, the Greek word that Paul uses for love is *αγαπε* (agape) – spiritual love. And to love, in this sense of the word, is simply what to means to practise our faith: loving God by loving others as we love ourselves. And Paul explores in

three parts what he describes at the end of chapter 12 as 'a still more excellent way.'

Firstly, Paul concentrates on how worthless spiritual practice is if, at its heart, it lacks love. Without love, speaking in tongues, prophecy, knowledge and understanding, faith to remove mountains, acts of charity and acts of self-sacrifice are nothing worth, are worthless, worth nothing ! Here, Paul is simply asserting that true holiness is always informed by love but the danger is when people seek to master spiritual gifts without a change of heart – the danger of using the tools of our faith for their own ego and self-aggrandisement rather than as a means to help others.

Secondly, Paul offers a definition of what love is – sixteen qualities or virtues expressed positively (8) and negatively (8). Love is patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; does not insist on its own way; not irritable or resentful; does not rejoice in wrong-doings but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things – love never ends. As your priest here, it is sometimes my privilege to marry two people who are very much in love. It's a delight to see the way they look at each other, speak to each other, behave with each other. Being in love is transformational, inspirational, pointing to what it can truly mean for us to be human. A lifetime is too short a time to express how much we can love and be loved. But then, love never ends.

And that assertion – that love will never end – is the subject of Paul's third and final section: that everything has a sell-by date, that all things will pass away but

not love which will outlive the grave. Paul holds up to us three of the fruits of the spirit: faith, hope and love but, to Paul, clearly love is the greatest of these spiritual gifts. Paul points out the fact of life that children become adults, that we all grow up. Paul points out that at present our knowledge and understanding and what we can see is necessarily limited. I love his image of seeing in a glass darkly, of looking at a reflection in a mirror but then the promise that one day we'll see God face-to-face, of knowing even as we are known.

Well, I want to thank David Bargioni for the opportunity of sharing such a profoundly beautiful and exciting passage with you. I can't do it justice in just the five minutes my sermons usually last and 1 Corinthians 13 is well worth repeated study on our part. It's not that the passage changes but we do and how we make sense of what we read in the light of our experience will understandably change.

But let me leave with this triple thought: that love is essentially the Christian way, that love is the heart of our Christianity and that love is a work in progress.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

11th December 2016

