

3 February 2019

1 Corinthians 13

Love is ...

1. Love is ... essential (vv 1-3)

These wonderfully poetic words about love, words that can very easily stand on their own, come in a very specific context.

Divisions have crept into the Corinthian community. One of the causes of those divisions is over the valuing of people's gifts. Some within the church are clearly being treated as second class citizens because their gifts are not valued as highly as some of the more extravagant or ecstatic gifts.

Paul has talked about valuing the gifts of all, and talked about how the church is like a body where each of the parts will be extraordinarily different ... but all just as valuable and as necessary as the other parts in making up the whole.

But now Paul pushes behind all of the talk about gifts and their relative value. He says that there is something even more fundamental at stake here. If all we do is argue about one another's gifts, then we have missed the point of it all.

"Let me show you the most excellent way ..." says Paul.

There is something even more important at stake for us here ... Paul is suggesting.

Why? ... Because, says Paul, we might be extraordinarily gifted and talented in all sorts of different areas that would appear on the surface to be everything that the church needs ... but if, in the end, we do not have love, then it is all for nothing.

Churches value ... and have probably always depended on, people who are good with words.

- people who can make sense of the Christian faith and can talk about their faith in an exciting and dynamic way
- those with the gift of the gab to talk about Jesus to the uninitiated
- those who can build up and encourage the faith of the faithful

- those who can put things into prayer, articulating the longings of ordinary disciples and helping them to pray

And people who are good with words usually end up centre-stage in the church, because we use a lot of words!

But Paul reminds us that we might be brilliantly gifted with words ... but if we are utterly hopeless at love ... then actually our loveless lives will speak louder than our clever words and we might just as well be banging a noisy gong.

If we value people who are good with words, we also value people whose minds are open to the things of God:

- gift of prophecy – those who allow their imaginations to consider how this world can be transformed by the reign of God and so to challenge us with the new possibilities that God brings to our lives;
- those who fathom all mysteries and knowledge – those with intuitive wisdom and insight into who God is and how God is calling us to respond to him

But again, Paul says, if people who have these gifts end up showing no care, no love, no compassion for others in the life of the church ... then it's all for nothing.

And then Paul addresses those whose gift in the church is one of exercising faith –

- those people who take a lead in trusting in God, by their example or their encouragement of others

Paul says that it is possible for people with abounding faith to lose sight of the fact that actually what we are all about is love. And when they do, they negate all that they might accomplish through their acts of faith.

And then finally, Paul even talks about those whose gifts are those of generosity of life

- he talks about those who give generously to the poor

- and he talks about those who live the life of self-sacrifice ... even to the point of death

Surprisingly ... and yet with great insight ... Paul says that all of this can be done without any real love in the heart.

Generosity can arise from all sorts of motives

- to assuage our guilt
- to build our public image
- to win favour with God and others
- out of a sense of duty

Likewise acts of self-sacrifice ...

- can arise because of our guilt
- or can be an expression of self-loathing
- or can be from a warped sense of what God demands of us

And Paul reminds us that for the Christian community that just cannot be the way.

Central to everything that we do and are is love.

And we have totally missed the point if we allow anything else to prevent us from showing that love one to another ... and then reaching out to others in love.

2. Love is ... being people-centred (vv 4-7)

Having made it clear that love is essential, Paul goes on to outline what love looks like in practice.

I think he is saying to the Corinthians, “Consider these words. What does this have to say about the way you have been treating one another in your dispute about gifts?”

And all of this is about attitudes and actions shown towards other people. Because, essentially, when we are driven by love our lives will be people-centred, because love is people-centred.

We have to deal with many other things in the course of our life and even in the course of the life of our churches ... but that must never stop us being people-centred in the way that go about things.

Effectively we have a list of things that love is and a list of things that love is not.

When love is being shown, this is what we will see:

- patience (with others)
- kindness (towards others)
- rejoicing with the truth (in partnership with others)
- protectiveness (caring for others)
- hope (always looking for the best in and with others)
- perseverance (staying by others ... being loyal)

Signs that love has been discarded or ignored:

- envy – always the sign of a divide between people – an inability to rejoice in the other person
- boastfulness ...
- pride – both of these about looking down on others
- rudeness – treating others with contempt or derision
- self-seeking – being concerned only with myself
- easily angered – the quick temper that usually comes out of self-defence
- keeping record of wrong – holding the past against people ... keeping a tally to bring up in the future
- delight in evil

What their argument about gifts was doing was stirring up all of the worst of these attitudes of envy, boastfulness, pride and rudeness. It was encouraging people to be self-obsessed and self-centred.

When we are motivated by love, we will be building people up, not putting them down

- we will be supporting and encouraging people to be the best that they can be
- we will be patient with people when things go wrong
- we will stick by people in the difficulties and distress
- we will understand people and show forgiveness

3. Love is ... what we are always growing into (vv 8-13)

Paul then wants to impress upon these Christians in Corinth the significance of love for Christians, by exploring the question of where we are heading in our life with God. What is going to be the quality, the characteristic that is going to endure in our relationship with God if we look at where we are heading towards?

And Paul comes up with the answer that the thing that is going to stick around is 'love'.

Paul uses the illustration of growing up from childhood to adulthood. When we grow up there are some things that we grow out of and some things that we grow into.

I have grown out of wearing long socks and short trousers.

I have grown out of reading story books with pictures in ... unless I am reading to my grandchildren.

I have grown out of bursting into tears when I don't get my own way – I might do it inwardly but ...

As children we talk in a certain way, we think in a certain way ... but as we grow up there are things that we leave behind us.

Paul says that that is how it is with our knowledge and understanding of God.

At present – whether it is in our prophecy or in our theology or in our trying to explain the ways of God ... we only ever get things partially right.

But beyond this life, there is the promise that we will know God, even as we are fully known by God. We will no longer need the partial insight that has guided us in this life ... we will leave all of that behind. We will grow out of it.

Put all the effort you want into gifts of preaching, teaching, prophecy, speaking in tongues ... in heaven they won't be needed anymore because everyone will know God intuitively ... they won't need teachers and guides to help them.

But love will still be needed ... because that will still bind us together

But that's not how it is with love. Rather than leaving it behind, we will grow into it, and we will become perfected in love, because that is what life with God and with one another in the kingdom of God is all about – the perfection of love.

Love isn't something that we ever grow out of in our life with God, but it is something that we will grow into. In fact, it is something that we are always growing into. And life is a constant discovery of what this adventure of love is actually all about. But we do so in the knowledge that we will never leave it behind us, but this is the very core of what life with God and with one another is all about.

Which is why we need to make this the focus of our life now with one another and with God.

Churches now, as then, can easily find themselves distracted and missing the point of it all. We can get caught up in all sorts of other concerns and causes and end up not being very good at the people stuff ... at loving one another.

- looking after property
- maintaining a busy programme
- organising piety
- promoting or protecting principles

... and all of those things will need to be done ...

but never at the expense of being people-centred because we are a community of love.

And some people might say that this is not particularly 'spiritual'. But of course they would be wrong.

For Paul, love does not start with us. It starts with God. We can only ever love like this because God has first loved us.

This life of love begins by our being embraced by God and living our lives in fellowship with God.

Love is ... essential for the Christian community.

Love is ... about being people centred in all that we do.

Love is ... something that we will always be growing into and never something that we grow out of.

Because God is love.