

Sermon: The love of our God

Today's passage is one of the most famous chapters in the Bible.

1 Corinthians 13 has been read at countless weddings over the years – perhaps even your own! The apostle Paul's famous words about love have been described as a beautiful poetic masterpiece – as a great work of literature that can moisten the eye, and stir the heart. But it is also a deeper, more challenging passage than it may first appear.

For all its beauty and popularity, it is actually a very challenging chapter of the Bible. A chapter that is superficially sentimental, but close-up is a call to fundamental Christian discipleship. It is a chapter designed to challenge us and call us to repentance, rather than simply warm our hearts and moisten our eyes.

As we look at this passage today, God wants to teach us three things about love. First, in verses 1 to 3, we learn the Priority of love – why it matters. Secondly in verses 4 to 7 it describes the Properties of love. And lastly, verses 8 to 13 teach us the Permanence of love – why it will last forever.

Love's priority, love's properties and love's permanence.

Priority - What do you think a church needs most? What does any Christian congregation need above all else? Does it most need to be more prayerful or does it most need better worship? Does it most need a better understanding of the Bible or a stronger faith that could move mountains? Those are all very good things, things we should certainly be ambitious for at St. Andrew's.

But they are not the most important thing a Christian congregation needs. The thing a Church needs most must be love. We may be spiritually gifted, theologically knowledgeable, financially affluent and remarkably talented – but without love they count for little. Love must be the priority for every Christian fellowship.

That's what Paul is saying in verses 1 to 3 of our passage this morning.

Paul wrote those words because some Christians in Corinth were very proud of themselves. They had some spectacular spiritual gifts, had witnessed some remarkable miracles and claimed to have heavenly knowledge that set them apart from others. But they lacked love. They looked down on their Christian brothers and sisters. They were more interested in making a name for themselves than in serving others. Their attitudes and actions were selfish, not sacrificial. So, Paul reminds them that without love all our other spiritual gifts, talents and qualities are worthless.

The same is true today. Without love we will misuse or waste the gifts and talents God has given us. Unless love is the motivation and guide to our behaviour, we will waste the gifts God has given us. Our gifts and talents are given to help us serve other people and build up the Church, not to boost our own reputation or nurture our personal pride.

Without love our spiritual qualities, natural talents and religious fervour are worthless.

Now properties of love. What does love look like in practice? In verses 4 to 7 Paul gives us an inspired list of love's properties. He gives a comprehensive catalogue of loving qualities. Qualities that every Christian should aspire to, not just newly-weds!

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Those are powerful, poetic words, aren't they? But we shouldn't think Paul wrote them to serenade or flatter the church at Corinth. On the contrary, these words were written as a stinging rebuke to a selfish and divided congregation. As they compared these words to their own behaviour, the Corinthians would have experienced guilt and remorse – not moist eyes or warm feelings. The trouble with the Christians in Corinth is that their behaviour was falling far short of the standard of love that Paul sets in this passage.

Some of the ways the Corinthians were following short were:

Some were being boastful and proud rather than humble and meek. They were boasting about their spiritual gifts and superiority compared to other Christians in Corinth.

Others were being impatient, rather than being patient. They began eating meals before other Christians had time to join them.

Still others in Corinth were being rude, self-seeking and unforgiving, rather than kind, compassionate and forgiving.

If we are honest, we too lack many of the properties of love. Just like the Corinthians, we are all too often guilty of pride rather than humility, of impatience rather than patience, or of evil instead of good.

In truth, we all fall short of God's standards. All except one person, that is. There is one person in history whose love never failed. There is one person who was (and is) love personified. Because as we look at the life of Jesus in the Bible, we see a man who was the perfect embodiment of the loving properties.

When God's Son walked on earth, he was humble, not proud. Generous not envious.

When Jesus healed the sick, he was being kind and compassionate, not selfish or mean.

Christ was patient with his friends and his enemies, never short-tempered or rude.

And, above all, Jesus was sacrificial, not selfish, when he laid down his life for us on the Cross. He was love in action when he willingly paid the price for our sins.

You see, Jesus was – and is – love personified. He is the perfect illustration of love's properties for us today. He is the perfect role model for a Christian fellowship learning to love. And he is the only source of forgiveness for sinners looking for salvation.

And finally, the permanence of love. Its now the first of February, and Valentine's Day is less than 2 weeks away. Valentine cards are usually full of all sorts of expressions, some silly, some sentimental, some very true. One true statement you may see in some Valentine cards is this – "Love never ends". It's a true statement because the Bible agrees. Because in our passage this morning we are told that love never ends. Love is a virtue without end.

Verse 8 of our passage says: "Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away."

Paul is saying here that spiritual gifts all have a sell-by-date. The spiritual gifts that some Corinthian Christians were so proud of – gifts like speaking in tongues – will one day end. These gifts are given as a temporary measure – a short-term arrangement to help us trust and follow Jesus in our imperfect world.

But one day, Paul says, "perfection" will come. One day every Christian will enter Christ's eternal kingdom. On one glorious day, every Christian will see Jesus "face to face". In the world to come even faith and hope will be redundant. We will see by sight, not by faith. What we currently hope for will have arrived in full.

But love will remain. Because love will be the serious business of heaven. For all eternity we will enjoy the love of God and the love of his people. For all time we will live in a relationship of love with the Lord Jesus and his church. So, its well worth getting some practice in today!

To conclude, I hope we've seen that our reading from Corinthians today is about more than just romantic love, and of interest to every Christian, not just newly-weds. It is beautiful, but also challenging:

It challenges us to prioritise love in our church life. Above all else we should seek to be an attractive loving fellowship here at St. Andrew's. Which we are.

It challenges us to display all the properties of love in our lives. We are to exhibit patience, kindness, humility and forgiveness in our relationships with one another.

And thirdly, it challenges us to remember that love never ends. Whatever gifts, talents or attributes we have in this life will one day pass. But our love, and God's love, will last forever.

The great news I want to leave us with is that Jesus can help us meet each of those challenges:

His life provides the perfect example, the perfect model, of what love looks like in practice.

Jesus also offers us the forgiveness we need for the times when our love fails or falls short.

And lastly, he has given us his Holy Spirit. A Spirit who will give us the strength and stamina to grow in love. The help to love we will all need until the glorious day when we see Jesus face to face. Amen