

Scripture Reading for Feb 3rd 2019.

1 Corinthians 13 (NIV)

¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ 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. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Sermon: True Love

It is said that the Inuit have many words for “snow”; I’m sure they do. The Greeks had *four* main words for “love”: *philia*, *storge* (‘store-gae’), *eros*, and *agape*.¹ *Philia* means affection, fondness, or deep friendship – as in “Philadelphia,” the “city of brotherly love.”² *Storge* is familial love, is a kind of love between parents and their children, or even a pet; this kind of love is seen as natural, often unilateral or asymmetrical, and – at times - dutiful. *Eros*, as you might expect, is sexual, sensual, passionate, emotional, and is often oriented toward *self*-satisfaction and the physical body.³ *Agape* is the love that comes from within towards another because of their inherent preciousness. It denotes, care, regard, and respect for the other and actively desires only their well-being.⁴ *Agape* is also spontaneous, unmotivated, creative, free, and sacrificial; God’s love for us is therefore *agape* love and, in response to that love, we are also called to love selflessly.⁵

¹ There were other related words too: *ludus* (flirting, seducing, uncommitted ‘love’); *pragma* (is a kind of practical ‘love’ founded on reason or duty and one’s longer-term interests and making it work or by turning a blind eye to indiscretions – cf. arranged marriages or celebrity/political marriages); *philautia* (self-love, whether healthy or unhealthy).

² See: Rom 12:10; 1 Thess 4:9; Heb 13:1; 1 Pet 1:22, 3:8; 2 Pet 1:7.

³ If *eros* is love of the ‘body,’ then *philos* of love of the ‘soul.’

⁴ Some modern secular writers link *agape* with altruism, the unselfish concern for the welfare of others.

⁵ See: John 3:16, 13:34; 1 Cor 16:14; 1 John 4:8. This divine love is *tangibly demonstrated* in the life of Jesus the Messiah.

Paul uses the word *agape* in this beautiful and well-known love ‘poem.’⁶ It is one of the favourite texts to have at a wedding, not least because this ‘ode to love’ (perhaps surprisingly) does *not* mention God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit and that’s most convenient for a secular society!⁷ Hence, these familiar words can become sentimentalised and, as a consequence, ineffective. Paul, however, is *not* speaking here about *romantic* love and as long as we are aware of that, ministers can consciously *re-interpret* them for the context of a wedding. Paul was writing to the church in Corinth, one that was hung up on spiritual gifts, like “speaking in tongues” and on attaining spiritual wisdom and knowledge. It was a church that was *not* united in purpose, and so Paul adapted the well-known analogy of a body functioning together harmoniously – as we heard last week.⁸ While the literary prowess of Paul’s love poem would surely have appealed to elitist element in Corinth, nevertheless, it had a sharp sting in its message. So what was Paul saying? Let’s have a look.

First, love should *not* be seen as a spiritual “gift” [*charismata*⁹] given just to a few special people! At the end of the previous chapter, Paul begins by saying that love “is a more excellent way”¹⁰ of living. Consequently, behind Paul’s powerful rhetoric is an exhortation, even an implied reprimand, to heal the divisions within the church. Paul, then, sees living out an active life of *agape* love as the antidote to factionalism within a community.

Paul begins by mentioning the kinds of things the Corinthian church cherished, namely, “speaking in tongues,” admiration of brilliant oratory, and seeking profound spiritual wisdom and knowledge. He mockingly exaggerates such things and then deflates them by cleverly presenting himself as a hypothetical example to make the point. Listen again to what he says: “If I were to speak with human or angelic tongues,¹¹ but had not love, I would have become only a resonating jar or a reverberating cymbal.¹² And should I have the gift of prophecy¹³ and if I penetrate all the depths too profound for mere human discovery and have all “knowledge,” and if I possess the gifts of every kind of faith sufficient to move mountains¹⁴ – but, after all, may lack love, I am nothing. And if I give away all my

⁶ This famous ‘hymn to love’ is sometimes seen as a digression (in the context of 1 Cor 12,14), and some even suggest it was not written by Paul. Closer study, however, strongly suggests it is an integral step in his argument and shifts the praise of virtue as an illustration of his exhortation and is a contextually a potent response to earlier issues raised in his letter. [Technically, it is a literary *encomium*, which is an ancient rhetorical speech in praise of a hero – in this case of virtue. Paul’s praise of love (*agape*) bears similarities to Plato’s praise of love (*eros*), and the praise of truth in 1 Esdras 4: 34–40.]

⁷ Even so, we can be sure that Paul’s understanding of love is fundamentally formed by the love of God shown in the death of Christ – see Rom 5:8; Gal 2:20.

⁸ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Unity-Diversity-and-Interdependence.pdf> Being the “body of Christ” is a description of the new *culture* of life “in Christ.” We now see this is *embodied* in a *life of love*.

⁹ See 1 Cor 12:4-11, this provides important context for 1 Cor 13.

¹⁰ 1 Cor 12:31.

¹¹ See also 1 Cor 14:7–11, 18–19.

¹² An acoustic jar on theatrical stage was an ancient megaphone - an acoustic resonator. It produced no melody but amplified itself. Note, Corinth was particularly famous for its bronze-work. Hence, the noisy gong/cymbal is just that, a crash, a clang! These words could also be a satire of the cult of Cybele, which was noted for its wild ecstatic worship practices.

¹³ Concerning “prophecy” as “forthtelling” or “preaching”: hellfire sermons are *not* “in love,” they result in fear!

¹⁴ This resonates with Mark 11:22–24 and Matt 17:20.

possessions to feed the needy, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,¹⁵ but have not love, it counts for nothing.”¹⁶ In a sense, Paul is condemning ‘doing the right spiritual practice for the wrong reason’ and his key point is this: nothing is to be gained in the life of the church when love is absent.¹⁷ Without love, genuine spiritual gifts from God, such as speaking in tongues, powerful preaching, and spiritual discernment, all become blatantly self-indulgent, self-serving, and self-defeating.¹⁸

So what *is* true love? Paul spells it out, listen again to his well-known words but from a *different* translation, as that may enable us to hear afresh his message. “Love waits patiently, love shows kindness.¹⁹ Love does not burn with envy, love does not brag, love is not inflated with its own importance. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not preoccupied with self-interest, it is not easily exasperated or angered, it does not keep a record of evil. Love does not delight in wrongdoings²⁰ but joyfully celebrates truth. Love never tires of protecting,²¹ never loses faith,²² never exhausts hope, never gives up.²³ Love never fails.”²⁴ This is without doubt a most beautiful description of love, and there are several obvious things to note.

First, Paul uses some specific *negative* comparisons, such as: jealousy,²⁵ boastful,²⁶ “puffed up” with self-importance,²⁷ dishonorable toward others,²⁸ etc. This is because he has already raised these attitudes earlier in this letter to the Corinthian Church, so when they read this section, they will instantly realise all the things about their own behaviour that contradict this characterisation of love! Second, since this is *agape* love, it is also a description on how *God loves us*. God loves us with patience, kindness, and endurance. Moreover, God does *not* keep a record of our wrong-doings; his love incorporates forgiveness! Third, what Paul is speaking about is *not* some far-off ideal or noble virtue,

¹⁵ The Greek word for “boast” is very similar to that of “burned” and occurs in some ancient Greek manuscripts. We know of no Christians who were literally “burned” before 64 A.D. in Rome under Nero, and therefore perhaps the verb for “boast” is the best word here. Even so, Jewish martyr stories (e.g., 2 Macc 7:1-6; 4 Macc 6:24-30) contain literal burnings, so this textual issue is not settled. In the context of Paul’s earlier use of the word “boast” (1 Cor 1:29), boast here is also a critique.

¹⁶ Closely adapted from Anthony Thiselton’s translation; he (like Richard Horsley) emphasises Paul’s use of a *hypothetical* example. The last clause could also be translated as, “I help myself not at all” (NIBC).

¹⁷ Paul does not write about love in order to debunk tongues and other potent spiritual gifts, rather his point is love should govern their use in the church - see chapter 14.

¹⁸ Love’s quest can never begin with the question, “What’s in it for me?” Instead it asks the question, “What is best for you?”

¹⁹ Love waits patiently for the right time, and kindness is a pure and unselfish concern for the well-being of the other.

²⁰ i.e., love is not malicious.

²¹ The translation (NRSV, NKJV) “love bears all things” is very misleading. When, for example, a person has been abused (physically, emotionally, or sexually), this verse cannot be used as a reason for the victim to continue to endure and suffer. In matters of fundamental justice and protection of the less-powerful persons preyed on by others, love requires that justice occurs. We must protect the victim, not the victimisers. “love always provides a supportive roof of protection” is implied.

²² See also 2 Cor 5:7. “Never loses faith” is a better translation to “believes all things,” as naïve gullibility is not implied.

²³ The mention of the triplet of faith, hope, and love here also sets up Paul’s conclusion in 1 Cor 13:13.

²⁴ 1 Cor 13:4-8a. Closely adapted from Anthony Thiselton’s translation. [The last clause could also be translated, “love never ends,” and so link to the following verses.]

²⁵ 1 Cor 3:3.

²⁶ 1 Cor 1: 29–31; 3:21; 4:7; 5:6.

²⁷ 1 Cor 4:6; 4:18–19; 5:2; 8:1.

²⁸ 1 Cor 5:1–2; 6:12–20, or even 11:2–16, 20–22.

he insists that this is *the* essential feature of living together in a worshipful, Christian community. Consequently, love is not a talent that we must try to perfect, it's a *way of living*²⁹ and it arises in response to God's graciousness toward us and is evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.³⁰

The final part of this tribute speaks of love's *abiding character*. Paul addresses what is ultimate in spirituality. It is not, as the Corinthians might have thought, a pinnacle experience of speaking in tongues, or of spiritual insight, or of prophecy – *all* such things will eventually cease and pass away.³¹ When Christ returns (Gk. *parousia*) and the "age to come" begins, then these spiritual gifts will not be necessary. When we see God face-to-face,³² these sought-after spiritual experiences will be seen as mere child's play.³³ Paul then uses a local image, because Corinth was famous for its polished bronze mirrors. However, a mirror only portrays a *reflection* of reality, and while that image does not lie, it is dim likeness of the real thing. Paul insists that even the clearest image will be irrelevant at the fulfillment of history, when we see God face-to-face,³⁴ and, consequently, whatever experiences of the Holy Spirit we have now, they are only ever partial or incomplete – a poor reflection of the true reality. Because this is the case, it is quite plausible that Paul was re-enforcing his plea for *humility* concerning spiritual gifts and their worship experiences.

Until the "age to come" arrives in all its fulness, we live in this present age with the triplet of faith, hope, and love.³⁵ And Paul ends by saying the "greatest of these is love." Why is that? The reason is simple: when the age to come is here, and we experience God face-to-face, we will no longer *need* faith and hope; what remains then is love, for love never ends because "God is Love."³⁶ But all three are vitally important for right now. Our *faith* is directed towards the God who keeps his covenant promises forever. Our *faith* also affirms God's narrative of human history, that through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, God has inaugurated the new creation and will bring it to completion. Our *hope* focuses on the fervent desire to see a broken world restored by God into its rightful wholeness.³⁷ And it is our *hope* that enables us to endure in our sufferings and problems in this present age. *Love* is a foretaste of our ultimate union with God, graciously given to us now to be shared with all those around us in anticipation of history's completion.

In 1 Cor 14:1, Paul adds: "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit"; both are important. Yet it is only when love presides over our common life in church will the spiritual gifts find their rightful place and achieve the purposes intended by the Holy Spirit. The purpose of love, then, is

²⁹ 1 Cor 12:31b.

³⁰ See also 1 Cor 1:30, 3:7, 8:6.

³¹ 1 Cor 13:8-10. There is nothing to say here that the gifts will cease once the Bible has been formed, or with the death of the apostles – as some Christians have claimed! The contrast is between now - the *present age* - and the *age to come*.

³² See also Num 12:6-8.

³³ 1 Cor 13:11. Paul develops this further in 1 Cor 15.

³⁴ As the old hymn puts it, "When I see thee as thou art, I'll praise thee as I ought."

³⁵ 1 Cor 13:13. See also Rom 5:1-5; Gal 5:5-6; Col 1:4-5; 1 Thess 1:3, 5:8.

³⁶ 1 John 4:7-21. (Note, *agape* is used here too.)

³⁷ See Rom 8:18 – 39.

to build-up or edify the church. That is why Paul later says in his final exhortation: “Let *all* that you do be done in love.”³⁸ Without love, nothing else matters.

I have a few concluding remarks:

First, some of you may say to me afterwards that, “I have ruined this ‘love poem’ for you”! If that is the case, forgive me (!), but that can happen when we study the Bible and better appreciate a text in context. Think too of the memorable parables of Jesus; they also had a bite to them and he used them to deliberately unsettle his audience. We can’t sentimentalise Jesus or his message, and the same is true of this profound love passage.

Second, we have just sung the words, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” The simple question is, “Will they?” I hope so, because the kind of love Paul writes about is *agape* love, *true love*, the kind of love God has for us and supremely demonstrated in Jesus Christ. If our love is also like that, not only do we *authentically* bear the name of “Christian” – a follower of Jesus [the Messiah] – but we also model divine love amongst each other in this community of faith. This is the “more excellent way” of living Paul spoke about³⁹ and precisely because it is authentic and different, it *will* be attractive to others. I have witnessed this for myself in the various churches I have been a part of in various cities. Remember too, because *agape* love is a way of living, *not* a duty, and it begins in small ways and increases with practice until it becomes ‘second nature.’⁴⁰ Each act of *agape* love is a step in the right direction, so we must always be encouraged as we enact our faith and hope.⁴¹

Third, I urge you to think over all these things; whatever words or phrases have come to your minds today, continue to ponder on them. For some, those negative critiques of Paul to Corinth might feel directed at you personally. For others, you may be fixated on what it will be like to see God face-to-face! For still others, the role of, or desire for, spiritual gifts may now seem in better perspective. Whatever you heard, *also hear* of the depth and quality of God’s love for *you* as an individual, and for *us* as Church.

Finally, one of my favourite Christian authors is Adrian Plass, because he writes about the Church with humour as well as love – and we need both! He times the length of a minister’s sermons by the number of fruit gums he can eat. He notes that sermons on “Sin” can last a whole 10 fruit gums, but a sermon on “Love” only 4! There is, alas, too much truth in that caricature. But in this case, I trust ‘less is more’! Let us pray.

³⁸ 1 Cor 16:14. Love is, therefore, *character* forming – or a fruit of the Spirit.

³⁹ 1 Cor 12:31. In this sense, the Church is God’s new society.

⁴⁰ Actually, that’s not a bad description, because this ‘second nature’ is the *new creation of life in Christ* that Paul mentions in his next letter to the Corinthians (see 2 Cor 5:17).

⁴¹ This also ties in with Paul’s use of child/adult imagery in 1 Cor 3:1-3; 13:11.