

16 September 2020, Weds 9.30am

I Corinthians 12: 31b – end of 13; Luke 7: 31-35

Zoomed service 9.30am

1. An impossibly high standard?

Paul is writing to members of the Church in Corinth, which was, as we know, riddled with divisions and factions. And after writing about spiritual gifts and the importance of acknowledging their interdependence within the body of Christ, he now launches into what must be one of the best known passages of his writing, this marvellous analysis of the gift of love, and of its supremacy over all other gifts. Thank you, Jenny, for reading it so beautifully for us.

It falls into three parts: firstly, the importance of love. Then how love behaves and finally its eternal nature. It is perhaps the second section on how love behaves that makes it such a popular reading for wedding. Our culture tends to emphasis emotion – how we feel when we are ‘in love’. In contrast, Paul writes about the very down to earth behaviours that should be seen as characteristic of a truly loving relationship, such as a lack of boasting or scoring points.

I have often thought, when preaching at weddings, that this is an impossibly high standard for us as human beings, and of course it is, for this is a picture of God’s love – an ideal to which we can only aspire, and perhaps learn to approximate, not at the start of a relationship but after many years.

2. Acknowledgement of our weakness

Reassuringly, however, the passage also acknowledges our weakness, something that is clearly spelled out by Luke in the short passage we heard as our gospel reading. A couple of months ago, in early July, we heard a similar passage from Matthew’s gospel as part of our Sunday reading. Today it contains echoes of Paul’s statement that we are like children.

Looking again at the reading from Corinthians, I am struck by those three paired statements:

- now our knowledge is partial, then it will be complete;
- speaking and thinking as a child, in future as an adult
- seeing dimly, then face to face.

Here is an explicit statement of how very far we need to travel if we are to love as God loves. Yet still we hold the

ideal before us, seeking to grow into that fullness and completion which will, in God's time and eternity, eventually be ours.

3. God knows our weakness but we strive to love

As human beings, we strive to love, believing Paul's words, based on his understanding of the teaching of Jesus, that this is indeed our highest calling, whatever gifts (of prophecy, of teaching, of speaking in tongues) we may have. It is only this power of love that can eventually overcome evil.

And returning to that second section of this chapter where he describes what love looks like in practice, I am struck by some very unromantic and earthy words. For in verse 7, we are told that love **bears** all things, **believes** all things, **hopes** all things and **endures** all things.

Loving people – whether a partner, friend, parent or child, is hard. We do not always feel warm and overcome with affection – rather, love can lead to deep grief and disappointment. Indeed, grief is in many ways the price we pay for love.

Listening this week to the accounts of those whose relatives were killed in the Manchester bombing makes us all too aware of the pain of love, and our hearts are touched by their grief. Yet even in much less extreme circumstances, love involves bearing much. I see my daughter raising children and enduring the ways in which her love for them is often apparently unappreciated. In families we all endure the slights and difficulties that relationships can involve. I think of those adult children with elderly parents who may be demanding and unable to understand the current COVID restrictions. Loving them when they may mistakenly assume non-one cares is hard. Friendships may go through times when we feel our care is not reciprocated. We remember a birthday, but no-one remembers ours. We may have to watch the pain or distress of loved ones who are sick or in difficulty. Love bears all things, endures all things yet still keeps believing and hoping.

And through all this, through our feeble attempts to be loving partners, parents, friends and neighbours, we are loved by God who **endures** our neglect of him and our determination to go our own way, not fully appreciating the magnitude of his love for us. He continues to **believe** in us and to **hope** for his love to be recognised and returned.

So today let us remind ourselves of God's great love for us and of his longing for our response. Let us ask him to give us grace to love others even when this feels impossibly hard. We know that in our own strength, our ability to love fully is partial and even childish, but let us ask for his great love to empower us today and in the week to come. **Amen**