

Sermon for Transfiguration 2021

13 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,^[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

This reading from Corinthians is trotted out on a regular basis at weddings, sometimes funerals, and occasionally during the Sunday services. It is in many ways considered to be safe in a non-Christian environment. After all, who can complain about a song based on love?

Superficially it is safe, especially during weddings, because the day of the wedding is focussed on the fairy tale of joy everlasting. Of course, the reality can be very different. It may well be love everlasting, but it is not always harmony and roses. The wedding is a day of joyful expectation, marriage is made successful through a determination to love the other, regardless of the hardships and disappointments that may emerge along the way. Thankfully, there are also times of wonder and joy. That is marriage.

Today I want to look at this reading from Corinthians in the context of the parish. Paul is writing this letter for the Corinthians. They are a bohemian lot, and they are focussed on their own gifts, talents, and self-centred life. There is an inner desire to be a step above anyone else. In a previous chapter Paul has spoken about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts vary in their recording in the bible, but they are generally identified as, "The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit being wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord."

Paul teaches that these spiritual gifts are to be exercised with love. If they are not exercised with love, they are destructive and self-righteous, even unwanted, activities. In this instance Paul begins by making reference to speaking in tongues, prophecy, knowledge, and faith. If these gifts are a source of pride and conceit, they are a waste of time. When a person has a spiritual gift and uses that gift to undermine authority in the church, or to belittle other members of the church, they have misunderstood the teaching of Paul, and they have misused their gift.

Everything we do in the context of the church, must be performed with a mature understanding of love. This is not some soppy anything goes type of love. The descriptive term for love in scripture is Agape. This is the love that God offers us. It is that which I call a mature love. We are embraced in an unconditional love that we can either accept or reject. In the same way that we love our own children, and we embrace them, and we correct them so does God do this for us.

Paul states that even if we give away our possessions and offer our body to be burned, without love this is a meaningless gesture.

What is the love that we are to show within our parish family? Paul itemises love for us. We are to be patient and kind. We are not to be envious, or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. We are not to insist on getting our own way. We are not to be irritable or resentful. We are to seek the truth of all things.

As we interact as a parish family, we are to always ensure that love is at the forefront of our behaviour. We are to hope, and we are to endure. When someone irritates us and offends us, we have two options. We can retaliate and strike back. Or we can offer our hand in love, seeking reconciliation and overall harmony.

Of one thing we can be sure - and Paul is adamant about this - love never ends. All of the gifts that the Corinthians are competing for, and with, amount to nothing in the larger understanding of God's love. All of those spiritual gifts will come to an end. They are eventually superfluous. Paul infers that they are childish when compared to the life that is to come. The spiritual gifts are a very real part of the church, but they are not the be-all and end-all of our faith.

It is true that each and every one of us will have a spiritual gift of some form. It is also true that we should be given the opportunity to exercise that gift. In this exercising of the spiritual gift we are to be reminded that it does not make us any better than another person. Each one of us is loved equally by our God. God does not love one person more than another any more than we love one of our children more than the other. It does sound a bit mundane to say that we are all equal in the eyes of God. I prefer to think that we are all God's favourites.

Paul finishes his teaching to the Corinthians by citing that Faith, Hope and Love all abide. We have our faith in God, we are given eternal hope through Christ, and both of these things are dependant on the unconditional love of God.

For our part we look around our parish family and we think how best we can encourage, support and above all, love each other.