

Love is the answer...1 Corinthians 13:4-7

This sermon is part two of our series on 1 Corinthians 13. I'll give a brief recap.

The busy port of Corinth is a wealthy, bustling and strategic crossroads for trade and a hotch potch of all manner of peoples and religions. Among the many temples in the city, the temple to the goddess Aphrodite is predominant – a place where sacred prostitution is practised as part of worship. In a city that became a by-word for sexual-immorality, St.Paul finds that he needs to write to the church and teach them about love.

Love is the answer to the problems of the struggling church. St. Paul has heard about their problems, has received letters about their issues and is writing back to them to address their needs. Among all the advice he gives, love stands out as the answer.

I was thinking about how and why St.Paul describes love in the way that he does, and I was thinking about well known love song lyrics. They are pretty meaningless when read out rather than sung...

*There's nothing you can do that can't be done
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung
Nothing you can say, but you can learn how to play the game
It's easy*

*Nothing you can make that can't be made
No one you can save that can't be saved
Nothing you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time
It's easy*

*All you need is love, all you need is love
All you need is love, love, love is all you need*

(NB – all three congregations guessed the song!)

I'm none the wiser for the lyrics by Lennon and McCartney

St.Paul personifies love and is describing the character of "love". This is no idol of a goddess in a temple, but is the character of God for God is love.

In the verses we are focusing on today, St.Paul lists 15 aspects to the character of love. 7 are positive and 8 are what love is not and this week I will focus on what this means to us as a church. Rather than meaningless lyrics, each word or phrase develops an understanding of love and the character we should reflect in our shared lives as a church.

St.Paul chooses to write the way he does because it's not into a vacuum, but into the real, messy, argumentative, competitive Corinthian church struggling to follow the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the opening verses of the chapter he has said that without love anything and everything they do is worthless. I get the sense of him stopping them in the tracks, like a teacher gaining control of the class. "Stop what you are doing. Stand still. Be quiet". All that you are doing without love isn't worth a hill of beans, so stop...

And his next words are critical.

Love is patient. Love is kind.

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These two descriptions of God's character are uppermost in St. Paul's mind and this isn't the only place he uses them. In the letter to the Romans he writes to them about the habit they have of judging one another...

do you despise the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

As a church we can be impatient. We want God to answer our prayers, for "things" to happen, for God to intervene. Speaking on my own behalf and clergy I know, we can be the most impatient of anyone in the church. We want to fix everything and sort everything and really do amazing things....but those amazing things are often our own plans and to make us look good and feel successful.

God shows us patience and kindness. These two characteristics should be in our DNA. What does church look like when characterised by patience and kindness?

It's a church that considers its actions prayerfully and carefully. Prayer must be a central feature along with open conversation both at PCC and among the whole congregation. We take time and get it right together.

Kindness becomes the antidote to having a dismissive attitude to anyone who disagrees or contradicts. In any discussion or development, we need to listen to all the voices and all the opinions. Prophecy doesn't always come from someone wrapped in a cloak with a staff in hand.

Have you noticed the habit we can all have of withdrawing away from someone critical? We retreat to be nearer someone who agrees with us!

Kindness helps us to step nearer the dissenting voice, the person who isn't convinced or is uncertain. Kindness allows us to understand their point of view and understanding leads, slowly and patiently to a better more robust outcome.

Having brought to mind these two exceptional qualities of God's grace, St. Paul then begins a list of 8 things that love is not and each one addresses an issue in the Corinthian church.

Envy
Boasting
Arrogance
Rudeness
Insisting on ones own way
Being Irritable
Resentful
Rejoicing in wrong-doing.

The first two speak into the issues about the spiritual gifts, both envying the gifts of others and boasting about the spirituality and gifts one has.

The 3rd (Arrogance) or "not being puffed up" is in complete contrast to the Agape love of God. God's love is self giving, out pouring, generous and for the benefit of others. One simply cannot experience or give Agape love and have any arrogance, the two cannot co-exist.

The 4th (rude) always puzzled me, a better translation would be "shameful behaviour". Remember St. Paul is

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speaking into a church where sexual immorality was present and in a city where it was everywhere! He writes elsewhere about "shameful behaviour" and here says – that's not love.

6 and 7 I think we can all recognise; that being irritable with others or holding onto resentment are not acts of love (holding onto any grudge or resentment harms you more than anyone else) but the last of the 8 is worth saying more on.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. This could equally be expressed Love does not rejoice in injustice.

If 'wrongdoing' is the right word, then the sense is that we shouldn't revel in the misfortune that occurs to others.

Be honest, have you ever gloated inside when something goes wrong for someone you don't like, or are envious about. It's not a nice characteristic...that smug inner feeling. HA – it serves them right!!!

That is rejoicing in wrong doing. I'd love to tell you I wrote those sentences from theory...but sadly.....

If the translation is "Love does not rejoice in injustice" then it might speak directly into the frequent habit church members had of taking each other to court over disagreements. It then makes sense of the next verse, love rejoices in the truth....

Either way it's about an unloving attitude to others.

What does this passage mean to us as a church?

We should be a church of prayer and open conversation to embody patience and kindness. A church that listens and values each person. A church that doesn't feel the need to envy a neighbour.

A church seeking to practice Agape love cannot be arrogant, and there can be no room for shameful behaviour – it will come to light.

Insisting on our own way and being irritable places self at the centre, not God, and holding resentment just demonstrates our lack of grace. Rejoicing in wrong doing reveals our inner poverty.

If the outward expression of our church is to be **loving service**, it can only come from a church that embodies Godly love.

St.Paul would say – all you need is love.

Where have I heard that before?