

Love changes everything

1 Cor 13: 4-7 Eph. 3: 14-19

Last week Jon spoke about the importance of the church doing it's utmost to show genuine love; today I want to turn the spot light onto how we as individuals show genuine love.... and for many, love and marriage are inseparable:

Love and marriage, love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage.

The story is told of a bride in distress as she arrives at the church so the vicar asked what was wrong. She replied that she was awfully nervous and afraid she would forget what to do. The vicar told her that she only needed to remember 3 things:

First, the aisle - that's what she'll be walking down.

Second, the altar - because that is where she should stop.

Finally, the hymn - because that is the first thing in the service.

She took a deep breath and started to say these aloud to herself as she began to walk down the aisle. Unfortunately nerves kicked in again and her family and friends of the groom were horrified to hear her repeating these 3 words:

I'll alter him

Yes. Today's tile is love changes everything, grooms included!

Hopefully many of you will remember being present at this occasion on Sunday 6th March 2011. [image of order of service] I certainly can because Jane and I had been married almost 18 hours by then. It was a truly lovely service when over fifty couples stood with us to renew the marriage vows we had all made on our own wedding days.

We all took our partner's right hand in our own and were asked:

“Will you seek to nurture and daily affirm your love and commitment to each other in the light of the love that God has revealed to us in Christ?”

And there was a resounding chorus of “Yes”....and I like to think that no one said it through gritted teeth.

That single sentence reflects what I want to explore today; how we should continually seek ways in which we can nurture and affirm God's love in and through our daily lives; in our relationships with other human beings. Not just our spouse our family and our circle of friends but with others who live in our community.

Love changes everything

Those of certain age or musical taste may also remember Aspects of Love by Andrew Lloyd Webber. The hit song from that show was 'Love changes everything' so at least you know where today's title came from and I shall refer to the song later.

But first let me tell you about one of the books which has greatly impacted on my understanding of love - The Shack written by William Paul Young. Jon showed the film version during Lent but the repeated phrase which meant so much to me in the book is not mentioned once in the film. The phrase is “learning to live loved”.

At the risk of being overly simplistic, when I realized for the first time that I was falling in love with Jane I didn't regard spending time with her as a difficult or onerous duty! I didn't think, "I really *should* spend time with her today but, nah, I think I'll skip it."

Why not? Because I was being motivated and captivated by that powerful force of nature that we call love.

My priority each and every day was to schedule as much time as possible to be with her and if I was a betting man I would wager the same was true for many if not all of you too. We were being motivated in ways that we did not understand.

Similarly the Christian life is rooted and grounded in love; God's love for us. It is God who loves first and it is we who respond to that love. Indeed, as we heard in the earlier liturgy we are commanded by Christ to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength. And that is what we have to learn.

Not only that, as we all know it's one thing to fall in love, but it's another thing to sustain it and cause it to grow deeper over the years. It doesn't run on autopilot! It requires focus and effort. In effect we have to learn how to live loved because God's love is so vast and omnipotent that no matter how much we learn or understand there will always be more to discover.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians which equally applies to us today Paul prays that we may be able to comprehend "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge...."

It is a deliberate paradox. We can know something of His great love, and it is definite knowledge, not just speculation. But, in another sense we can never know it completely, because it is unfathomable.

Fortunately, there are examples in every day life which help us understand love, if we can but recognize them.

Many of you will know Roz's son and daughter in law Sean and Gaby Doherty.

In the early hours of 14 June last year, Gaby watched in horror from her bedroom window as, just two hundred yards away, flames engulfed Grenfell Tower. Sean and Gaby had friends who lived there and Sean, who is a Church of England minister, dashed out to help.

In the days and weeks that followed the whole family became caught up in the grief, chaos and immense outpouring of love as they and the local community came to terms with what had happened.

Gaby writes very simply and movingly in this book - 'Grenfell hope'. At one point she writes "God wants us to grow into his image and he is the image of love, so unless we too are the image of love laid out in 1 Corinthians 13 – that love is patient and kind – we are due for some challenges".

One story from the book illustrated perfectly how love is patient and kind. Andreia lived nearby and on hearing that a family she knew had survived the fire, suggested that they come and stay with her and her daughter in their flat for a few days till they had got themselves sorted.

It soon became apparent that the family were badly traumatized and not only needed time and space to come to terms with what had happened but also needed privacy.

So Andreia and her daughter just put a few clothes into some carrier bags and moved in with her

parents, leaving the family in her flat. The few days became six or seven weeks.

Remember Christ's first commandment which I referenced earlier about how we should love our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength? Well it continues.... the second is this "love your neighbour as yourself"

Andreia's story tells us what love is all about. Not only was this an act of love to a neighbour but also you can not help but admire the degree of patience that Andreia, her daughter and indeed her parents showed for all those weeks in a spontaneous and wonderful act of kindness.

One extreme example, perhaps....but love can be seen in our daily lives in any number of different and gentle ways. A certain person who shall be nameless came into work here on Wednesday as usual.

Only by chance did we discover that it was her twenty first birthday that day. The following morning by arrangement several of us gathered and surprised the birthday girl with a rendition of Happy Birthday and gave her presents and a cake. I hope that she understood that this was a very simple way of expressing love in action – and an example of great patience as we were kept waiting for her to blow out so many candles before sharing the cake with her.

More seriously, if you were to ask the apostle Paul, "What motivated you to give up everything for Christ and the gospel? How could you endure all that you did for Christ and keep going?" I believe you would see tears well up in his eyes and he would answer:

"I live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved me* and gave Himself up *for me*" (Gal. 2:20).

He might add "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:38-39)

Absolutely nothing can or will separate God's love from us. God's love is permanent, is steadfast and is freely offered. God's love changes everything. It is incumbent on us to learn to live loved, to grow in the image of God, to be seen and known for our love in action, whenever and wherever the opportunity arises just as Andreia's love was so evident at that critical time.

Indeed, the closing lyrics to Andrew Lloyd Webber's song could have been written as a prophetic epitaph for the Grenfell Tower fire:

Yes love, love changes everyone
Live or perish in its flame
Love will never, never let you be the same
Love will never, never let you be the same!

Love changes everything. Love changes everyone. Love will never, never let you be the same.