

Immediately after citing love as being patient and kind Paul mentions four things that love is not: it is not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude.

Often the best way to describe something is to say what it isn't. You might describe a smooth surface as being a surface where there is no bump or rough spot. Bumps and rough are not what smooth is, but what smooth isn't. In scripture when St John tells us about what heaven is like in Revelation, he says it is the place where there is no death, mourning, crying or pain.

I think Paul is telling us that love can only be understood by seeing the opposite and by knowing what it isn't.

Love isn't envious.

Sadly, we live in a world of much inequality. Some have better looks, better health, greater wealth and so on. There are constant reminders all around us, particularly here in Sunningdale, where at best we might feel uncomfortable and at worst we might dwell on things being unjust or unfair about what we don't have.

At Spring Harvest this year as I was walking along I heard one mother angrily ask her son "Can't you for once just be glad for what you've got instead of what you haven't?".

Recently our two grandsons aged 3 and 4 both wanted to play with the same toy. Neither would let the other have it and tears soon flowed. Grandma Jane in her usual calm way persuaded one to play with something else, but there was nothing she could do to stop the glares of envy that followed.

I wonder if this is what Paul meant in verse 11 about putting childish ways behind him; that we need to be emotionally mature to be loving instead of envious.

Love isn't boastful or arrogant

Jon has repeatedly told us that his favourite book is *The Wind in The Willows* so I'm sure that I don't need to say anything other than 'Mr Toad' for you to understand what boasting and arrogance is all about. The boastful person always wants the elevated view he has of himself to be shared with others. The proud person wants others to see, hear, and acknowledge their accomplishments.

Jesus was neither arrogant or boastful when he lived amongst us. Remember it was he who took the servant's place during the last supper. We can imagine the disciples looking at each other, 'well I'm more important than him', 'he's been with us less time than I have surely he should be the one doing it and so on.

But it is Jesus who gets up and washes their feet. They are silenced and rightly ashamed. They were arrogant and boastful and Jesus in his humble way showed them what love is.

When the good Samaritan stopped to help the man in need on the Jericho road, he didn't concern himself with how his action might be looked down on by others, or how the action was beneath his standing or how his reputation might suffer. No his focus was simply on someone else's need.

Love is not rude

Rudeness is more often than not the mode of delivery of the arrogant and boastful person and it is often not only in what they say but in the way they say it and rudeness is finding more and more acceptance in today's culture.

Public behaviour and words that were unthinkable a generation ago are now commonplace. We live in what essayist Merrill Markoe calls a "renaissance of rudeness " and sadly I fear we need look no further than many examples set by our elected Members of Parliament.

Perhaps they forget that rudeness is rooted in selfishness. Manners are meant to reduce the friction of human interaction; discourtesy reveals a lack of consideration for others. The ill-mannered person is communicating that "it's all about me", not the topic of debate or principal.

Love, by contrast, cannot be selfish, for the simple reason that love is concerned for the other person's well-being and in 1 Peter (3:15) we are called upon as Christians to give testimony about what we believe and defend our faith, then we are to do so "with gentleness and respect", just as in Ephesians 4, Paul calls on us to speak the truth in love.

This is what I meant last week when I referred to us having to focus on and work at learning to live loved in order to sustain, enrich and share God's love with others and by doing so be seen and known for our love in action.

On Wednesday evening I re-watched The Shack and was reminded of a line spoken by God the Father: "Life takes a little bit of time and a whole lot of relationship". Love is central to God's will and purpose and that is something which is easy to forget in relationships in our increasingly secular world.

Either explicitly or implicitly envy, arrogance, boasting and rudeness are listed in that appalling list of behaviours which Paul warns about in his second letter to Timothy. Individually and collectively, they represent dangers to those of us who seek to learn to live loved.

I have to confess to smiling at the end of verse 5 when Paul tell us to avoid such people! Well we would, wouldn't we? But of course, for much of the time we don't.

Sometimes we can't because we live with them or work with them but sometimes we do have the choice; we don't have to accept a social invitation to spend an evening with someone who is like that.

For over thirty years I loved playing bridge; it was a game I was happy to play whenever and wherever the opportunity arose particularly when combined with excellent food and wines. Slowly but surely my interest waned primarily because I became increasingly disenchanted with the bickering, back biting and down right rudeness of so many players.

Bridge is a partnership game so when my partner became too ill to play I chose not to find another and I haven't picked up a single card for nearly 13 years.

I may be made in the image of God but I know I'm not perfect; indeed probably far from perfect at times. As Jane reminds me; I do have my faults. There are times when I have said things which I shouldn't, and I know I was envious of the contents of a friends wine rack recently and 'brother stubborn' has been known to sit on my shoulder from time to time, mea culpa..... I can be stubborn.

But I like to think that first and foremost I am learning to live loved and making conscious choices in daily situations which show what love is rather than what love is not.

So how do we take this forward, what impact can learning about love have?

The famous theologian Dallas Willard once said "the first act of love is always the giving of attention". He might have added, "the giving of attention to others". Because you can be sure that Mr Toad and his like would never dream of doing so.

I think our homework for this week is to start to embed what we are learning of love and a great place to start is how we give our attention to others. Let's not listen in order to tell our story or give our thoughts. Lets listen so that someone is really heard.

Lets not view others competitively and think smug thoughts about how we are better than them, let's have a generous and kind heart towards all we meet. Try this week thinking the best of each person you meet and even if you believe that would be a waste of time, just remember it wasn't raining when Noah built the ark.

