

Sunday 25th February Looking at the Cross: Love

readings: 1 Corinthians 12.21-13.13; John 10.11-18

The cross demonstrates the enormity of God's love for us and shows us that the love we are called to share is practical and sacrificial.

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

***13** If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

John 10 ¹¹ 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.'

Like last week these two passages are worthy of several sermons so we'll just cover the key points. This week is all about love, the kind of love that Jesus has for us and we should have with each other.

Paul is writing to those in Corinth who believe that their qualities are superior to others – whether in intellect, ability, looks, wealth, talents or even holiness. In many organisations there are hierarchies

where each person has his place – typically a few at the top and more at the middle and bottom. This was not how God envisaged society should be. Israel was a society where each tribe was given land that was family land and there was no king to rule over them. The tribes would come together to wage war against invading neighbours, but basically no one was in charge of them, other than God who raised up someone in times of need. The church began with the apostles and the disciples, but no one was really in charge as all worked together for the common good, sharing and worshipping together. But the Hebrew society in Israel established by God under Moses and Joshua no longer existed to provide the template for communal living. Jesus, the apostles and Paul lived in a hierarchical society where power was in the hands of the few, whether in religious bodies like synagogues and the Temple, or in the secular world. The converts among the Corinthians in the hierarchical society they lived in, were those with many different gifts, talents, abilities and different levels of wealth - just as we are in the church today. Those with the greater gifts usually end up at the top of any organisation and may think themselves better than those beneath them. But they shouldn't think this. The church isn't meant to be an organisation where the few at the top control those lower down. It's meant to be a community where God through Holy Spirit provides guidance and instruction to individuals in the community as they use the gifts given to them by God.

The church is meant to be a body with multifunctioning parts working together co-operatively for the kingdom of God. Spurgeon said *"I want every member of this church to be a worker. We do not want any drones. If there are any of you who want to eat and drink, and do nothing, there are plenty of places elsewhere, where you can do it; there are empty pews about in abundance; go and fill them, for we do not want you. Every Christian who is not a bee is a wasp. The most quarrelsome persons are the most useless, and they who are the most happy are peaceable, are generally those who are doing most for Christ."*

Paul goes on the list the various gifts – and most of them are not what we see ourselves as gifted with! Apostles, prophets, miracle workers, healers and interpreters of tongues may be gifts that we don't have. But we all do have one gift Paul mentions: being able to help others. Going back to Spurgeon, he listed this as:

A tender heart to really care. A quick eye to see the need. A quick foot to get to the needy. A loving face to cheer them and bless them. A firm foot so you will not fall yourself. A strong hand to grip the needy with. A bent back to reach the man.

Paul in his usual rhetorical fashion questions whether we all need these gifts, and then tell us what is needed for all of them to be of any use at all, since it appears that we could exercise the gifts we have without the prime ingredients needed to give glory to God.

The passage about love is known by us and the wider world because it is read at nearly all church weddings. The word love in the secular world has lost some of its meaning as it so often is *eros* love: romantic love and desire, or *philia* love of friends and family, while *agape* love – unselfish love - is seen as inapplicable in situations where it may involve sacrifice, time, money, attention and inconvenience with people who are neither family nor friends. Not getting involved is seen as safer than getting involved because of the consequences of involvement in the lives of others. Virtue signalling personal concern without any real involvement to actually do something is what Paul is telling the Corinthians and us is empty, boastful and unproductive. Shouting slogans in a demonstration demanding others do something or being activists to demand that the State do things that are our own responsibility is about the same as what those who passed by the man robbed by thieves did as they had other pressing matters to attend to. Passing by on the other side expecting someone else to do what is needed. Everyone who expects others to do what he could do himself but doesn't want to do because of the inconvenience, expense, or fear of consequences, is

not someone who is showing love of neighbour. You may think it is easy for me to say this because I'm not taking in refugees or housing the homeless – none of whom are part of our church community. Does God expect us to look for people to help rather than send people to us for us to help? That is a question that many Christians have struggled with, and when they say, yes we should go out to help those in need, my immediate response is: if God has put this on your heart, go and do what is needed yourself, and if you think more are needed, pray and find them to help you. If it is a word from God for me to do something that God wants me to do, then I must weigh that up and see if it really is from God. If it is a mere academic question (often posed by non-Christians) meant to point the finger at me for not getting on board and doing what they think I or the church should be doing while not doing it themselves, then is the empty-headed clanging of cymbals.

As a church we do have people with needs and who we could help. Who sees the need and responds is usually hidden – people quietly get on with loving others in whatever way is needed. But in the church there will be some who see the need and expect “the church” – in other words other people but not themselves – to deal with the need. Getting a group of people to help on an issue too much for one person is a possible solution: expecting others to sort it out without any attempt to provide or even look for a solution nor to get involved when perfectly able to do that is not loving. If we have gifts and use them for personal reasons – usually out of pride – or we fail to use them, what are we? Paul is saying is what Jesus says to those who did many things he expects of us but that he never knew them because they didn't do for him, didn't do these things to glorify God, but did them for their own glory to be seen by men – like the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. The world will honour those who do good works, and no one will deny that good works are good works. But Jesus says that if you seek your reward from men, you won't receive it in heaven. Matthew 6:5 - 6 *And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

Faith, hope and love are all acts of worship of God. Faith because we believe, hope because we know the truth about where we're going, and love because we seek a personal relationship with God. We won't need faith nor hope in heaven, but we will always need love because there we will continue to love God. Love is not an emotion, but an act of will. Love is a choice, but sometimes it comes as a consequence of choice. Falling in love with Jesus can be an emotional response to choosing to accept him as Lord and Saviour – it was for me, and the result is a desire to follow and obey him that hasn't gone away. Emotional love can wither and die when the person we love may leave, not want a relationship, or damage us in some way that changes our feelings towards her/him. Love grows as relationship grows, and so keeping close to Jesus keeps our love strong.

Moving on the passage from John's Gospel about the Good Shepherd. Again, a well-known passage. What are its key points?

Firstly, that Jesus is the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. Jesus is saying to his disciples that he is willing to die for mankind in order to save mankind. He is also talking about the shepherds who will be looking after the flocks in the future church. They too must love their sheep.

Secondly Jesus is saying that there will be shepherds who are not true shepherds – the hirelings who do not love the sheep and who will not defend them against attack and will let them scatter. These will be men who have the abilities to be shepherds being qualified and gifted but who sadly are doing their jobs for the money or position but lack true love of their flocks and also do not really love Jesus either very much. When they need to stand up for Jesus, they will instead prefer to side with the world and its values. *“How many there are of whom we have reason to fear that they must be*

hirelings, because, when they see false doctrine and error abroad, they do not oppose it! They are willing to put up with anything for the sake of peace and quietness." (Spurgeon). In seeking peace and quietness the result is often the opposite. Those in the flock, the tares among the wheat, who want false doctrine and error are not peaceful nor quiet and will seek approval for their actions. They are wolves who wilfully wallow in their sinfulness. The others around them may turn a blind eye for what they think will be a quiet life and will justify themselves by claiming that loving others involves acceptance of sinners and that rejecting sinful behaviour just invites conflict. These seeking the quiet life will be those who Jesus says he never knew despite their protestations that they did so much for him.

Thirdly the good shepherd will know his flock and his flock will know him. He will be recognised by the flock as the one who truly loves them because he loves Jesus as he loves them. Jesus refers to shepherding because his listeners knew about sheep and shepherding. In a time without fences and fields in which sheep grazed, they stayed together because they responded to the call or voice of the shepherd. He would call them, and they would come. Yes there would be the odd sheep that didn't hear because it wandered off too far, as so that sheep would have to be searched for while the others stayed together or were in the fold. *(There is a story about some French soldiers in North Africa in the late nineteenth century who decided to help themselves to a number of sheep – stealing them as they seemed to belong to no one and were grazing among the scrubland with no one around. Driving the sheep toward their little fort, they heard a shout in the distance: the sheep stopped and ran towards the shout, and the soldiers couldn't keep hold of them. The shepherd called and the sheep responded.)* The flock responds to the shepherd because of his words, his life style, his actions, his faithfulness and his love. In life we can all hide some part of ourselves that we don't want others to see, but in doing so, we cannot hide from God. Those in the flock who are filled with the Holy Spirit usually can recognise others filled the same Holy Spirit. Jesus says that the good shepherd puts the interests of others above his own self-interest, even to the extent of giving up his life to protect the flock.

Fourthly, the desire of Jesus is that we be one church under him, and that he will gather his flocks so that they all hear his voice and obey his commands. Verse 16: *I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.* That doesn't mean – as Jerome supposed by mistranslating "one flock" as "one fold" (the two Greek words are different)– that there is just one great big sheepfold - that is the Catholic Church with the Pope as the shepherd. It means that all the flocks obey Jesus who is the good shepherd rather than looking elsewhere for leadership. The Latin Vulgate is a personal translation by Jerome and his error has been used by readers of Latin to interpret what Jesus said in a way that suits their agenda.

Lastly Jesus tells us that he has the power over life and death because of the authority given to him by God. He forecast what would happen to him and that it was his choice to do what was necessary. We're glad he made the choice so that we can be forgiven when we repent and ask for forgiveness of our sins. As ever we have much to praise God – he gives a route to follow which brings us eternal life as well as a life where we have the assurance that we will never be left nor forsaken. Amen.