

## **Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> September 8am and 6pm, Trinity 13: Romans 13. 8-end**

Words from our epistle, *'Owe no one anything'* St Paul says, *'except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.'*

In common with the teachings of Jesus, Paul defines love as the one thing needful, the fulfilling of the law. But the question is, how is it – in a confusing, at times lonely and self-seeking world – that we are enabled by God to truly love? To be Christ-like? And to build communities of love, in our families, our church & our neighbourhoods? Yes, how can we learn to love one another, and so fulfil the law of Christ?

One of the privileges of ordained life is presiding at weddings and funerals, and caring for individuals and families as they navigate the highs and lows of love and loss and belonging. And one reading that I have often found helpful, as I explore with people (on these occasions) the reality of love, as the Church proclaims it, is from the modern desert dweller & spiritual writer, Carlo Carretto. And he writes thus:

*'It is love which must determine man's actions, love which must give unity to what is divided.*

Love is the synthesis of contemplation and action, the meeting-point between heaven and earth, between God and Man.

I have known' he writes, *'the satisfaction of unrestrained action, and the joy of the contemplative life... and I repeat again St Augustine's words: "Love and do as you will". Don't worry about what you ought to do. Worry about loving. Don't interrogate heaven repeatedly saying, "What course of action should I pursue?" Concentrate on loving instead.*

And by loving you will find out what is for you. Loving, you will listen to the Voice. Loving, you will find peace.

Love is the fulfilment of the law and should be everyone's rule of life; in the end it's the solution to every problem, the motive for all good. *"Love and do as you will"*

The reality is, of course, that we all come – in our backgrounds, in our families, in our life experience – with all different kinds of experience of loving. Some have received much love; others not; some seem to find that loving comes naturally; but most of us find it very difficult, and are only too aware of our brokenness, vulnerability and limitations in truly loving and trusting other people. For love may be the answer, but it certainly isn't straight forward or easy. And we all rely wholly on God's loving mercy and forgiveness, to bind together and heal what is formerly divided.

So what, then, helps us – as we journey on – to love better, to strive (as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, that great hymn to love) to follow the better way?

And I want to look, very briefly, at what the Bible says; at the reality and possibility of prayer; and at our attempts to follow love in Christian community.

The Bible, if we follow it through, is quite clear – isn't it – that love (the disposition and act of loving, whether family and friends, or strangers) is not an isolated thing, but indissolubly linked to the love of God Himself. St Paul, in our readings, suggests that love fulfils all the commandments, at the heart of which

(of course), summarised in the Book of Deuteronomy is to 'love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.' So love of neighbour follows on from love of God, who is the very source of love. Without God, we might dare to suggest - not least following a week of statistics showing a further decline of faith in our society - how else do we find the energy and motivation to love other people, beyond those closest to us, whom we believe we have a vested interest in loving. As one of the correspondents in the Times newspaper put it this week, quoting G K Chesterton: 'When a man stops believing in God, he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes anything.' And anything may not include the notion that compassionate love has any place in society.

So what about the relevance of prayer & worship in our quest to love better: to love others as we have first been loved by God, as we also must find a way of loving ourselves too? At the heart of Christian doctrine, as it's developed over the centuries, is the notion that love is at the heart of the Divine mystery or Holy Trinity. For love defines the attributes of God Himself. A love which flows between the persons of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - and a Communion which also overflows in love for human beings and indeed all creation. A love which is not forced on us, but which surrounds us (from our birth) and which we are free to discover, as we choose to respond to and inhabit that love ourselves. For God always respects our human freedom.

And this is where prayer and worship comes in, because it's only in spending time with God - in prayer - that the realities described in Christian doctrine become real to us, and we actually begin to inhabit and experience more fully the love of God Himself... So in prayer and adoration, in meditation on the scriptures and silent contemplation, as well as worship and the sacraments, we begin to discover and be empowered by that sacred love, the living flame of God's holy presence. We begin to trust the love and peace of God, which truly is real and present, and surpasses all understanding.

And thirdly, rooted in the Bible and in Christian prayer, we learn to love - to love others, as we love ourselves - in and through Christian community. For here, in the Body of Christ, however human and fallible the reality at times, however much we fail, we are taught to truly love one another; to live together in the love of God, who fills us and moves between us. An agape love which is kind and loving and compassionate, which welcomes others in, binds up the wounds of others, reaching out and channelling the ever present love of Christ, through the grace of his Holy Spirit. As Desmond Tutu has written:

'God hopes that we, who have experienced the wonder and depth of God's love, will be enlisted in God's team, to seek to draw in those outside, by emulating God's ways. We are enlisted to attract the recalcitrant, ultimately by love, by compassion, by caring. After all, many in the Ancient world were drawn into the Church when they witnessed just how these Christians loved one another.'

Let us pray:

O God of love, we ask you to give us love; Love in our thinking, love in our speaking, Love in our doing, and love in the hidden places of our souls; Love of those with whom we find it hard to bear, and love of those who find it hard to bear with us; love of those with whom we work, and love of those with whom we take our ease; that at length we may be worthy to dwell with you, who art eternal love. *Amen*