

“The Most Excellent Way”

1 Corinthians 12 : 31 – 13:13

And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

¹ If I speak in human or angelic tongues, 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 surrender my body to be burned, 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 dishonor 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.

One of the shortest, sweetest sentences in the whole Bible has just 3 words in it. And it's this : “God is love.” (x2) There's something just as short and sweet in the reading today – another 3 words : “Love never fails” (x2) – meaning – it will never run out – it will never finish – it will never be superceded. Love is forever.

1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most famous chapters in the entire Bible; people often choose it for weddings, because they hope their marriage will be full of love – or for funerals, because they're remembering someone with love. It's one of those bible passages which is nearly always taken out of its context; it's full of words and phrases which sound familiar and poetic, but which don't necessarily make complete sense without the background. So let's spend the next quarter of an hour digging a little deeper.....

Paul is writing a letter to a church – the Christians in the city of Corinth. It's an active, lively church, but the believers have lots of problems – they have all kinds of disagreements and disputes with one another. When they meet for worship, there isn't any sense of order – in fact, they're all competing for attention. The church is a mess!

So Paul's giving loads of advice. Just before our section, he's been talking about gifts from God – the spiritual gifts we were talking about a couple of weeks ago: gifts of caring, of teaching, of administration, of speaking in other languages, of bringing God's message..... He makes the point that no Christian should feel in competition with any other Christian. Be happy that God has given you this gift, he says: be happy that God's given a different gift to the next person : every church needs a mix of people doing a mix of things, so everyone can contribute and everyone can benefit.

And then he goes on to his next point, which he trails as being THE answer to all their issues... the most excellent way of doing things...

And this is how he begins. He says,

You can get your worship right, and take turns to speak; you can understand gifts properly, and not all expect to have all of them; you can use your own gift to its utmost – you can sort all your issues - but NOTHING you do will be of any use if you don't do it with LOVE. Paul is so determined to hammer this point home that he goes completely over the top...

Suppose I have the gift of tongues (he says) – a really dramatic gift that will make everyone think I must be really close to God – suppose I speak in any language of the world – or in unknown heavenly languages – without love it's- it's as nonsensical as the local pagans banging their drums endlessly on a single beat, clanging their cymbals – it makes no more sense; it's a complete waste of time. Suppose I have the gift of seeing God's truth, understand every mystery and know everything there is to know! – without love, I'm nothing at all. Suppose my faith in God is so strong I can tell a mountain to uproot itself and move –and it does - without love, I'm still worthless. Suppose I sell everything I have and give all my money, down to the very last cent, to the poor and needy - without love, this great sacrifice is rubbish. Suppose I make the ultimate sacrifice - become a Christian martyr and I'm up there in the hall of fame with all the saints : without love, it's just doesn't count.

Paul can hardly state his case more colourfully! So – we can't fail to get the message: NOTHING we do as Christians is worth a jot unless it's done with LOVE.

It hardly seems fair, does it?! If we use our Christian gifts for the church's benefit; if we understand all Christian truth (!); if our faith and generosity and commitment are beyond reproach – it doesn't weigh a feather in the balance against LOVE.

The Love that's being talked about here is, as it were, the umbrella word for all other loves. It's not just the sort of love which most of us – we hope – experience with people we know well : it's not just the mutual, romantic love of two people; it's not just the warmth of friendship; it's not just the love within a family – it's the sort of LOVE that God has for humanity. It doesn't need family ties or shared interests or the spark of attraction. It is not romantic or sweet : and it is definitely not soppy! It's not particularly easy, either..... This love is a caring about the well-being of another person; the readiness to put their interests before our own. It has no foundation in common sense or in natural inclination : it comes from God.

Of course, all the other loves can overlap with this bigger, broader one. This Love can make the difference between a marriage relationship standing or falling. It can make the difference between a friendship lasting or breaking up. It can keep a family together. This is Love with a capital L – *agape* in the Greek – God's love for us. And now Paul starts to describe this kind of love

First – “Love is patient”.

Patience is a great thing, isn't it, - unless we're being asked to show it! But if someone else is patient with us, isn't that just fantastic? When we're with someone who *isn't* patient, we tend to get all tensed up . We can't relax; we tend to make a mess of things - we can feel the other person getting annoyed... With someone who's patient, we've got time to try - and fail and try again if necessary. We can go at our own pace; we can make progress.... God is patient with us. So many people have an image of God that is the opposite of this : a God who is waiting for us to make a mistake, so he can come down on us like a ton of bricks! But God is Love. And Love is patient.

Then: “Love is kind”. Kindness is treating someone with real care and respect and, I would say, it includes giving them treats. Kindness is very much a giving thing. When we're treated kindly, we feel safe and special and protected. We're not anxious or afraid with that person. We can depend on their goodness. God is kind to us.

There are things that have no place in God's agape Love – and here are some of them : envy; boasting; being proud; dishonouring someone;

being self-seeking. All these resent the other person's success. They're about wanting the best for oneself and wanting to make other people feel small. But God wants us to be encouraged to greater things and he is prepared to sacrifice his own interests for us – a sacrifice that went as far as the cross....

“Love is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs”. (v5)
God's celebrated throughout the Bible as “slow to anger” and he promises us that he will not only forgive our wrongs – he will forget them as well. It's almost too much mercy, isn't it? It goes beyond what we think of as fair and nice and reasonable. But Love, like mercy, goes beyond reason.

“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth”.
God is always kind and patient with us, yes – but he never damages us by being an over-indulgent Father, giving his children what they want whether or not it's good for them. Love takes no pleasure in what's wrong or damaging – it takes great delight in what is right and good and true. And it is utterly consistent in all these things : it doesn't change every day. God doesn't have moods! Love *always* protects, *always* trusts, *always* hopes, *always* perseveres. God is always protecting us, trusting in our innate value, hoping for the best for us and from us, always sticking by us – even when we take no notice of him... With God, it's never too late. We've never blown it! God is always ready to have us back and go on loving us.

Paul rounds off what he's saying by going back to where he started – to all those dramatic signs of Christian service and commitment – speaking in tongues, generous giving, knowledge of God's truth – - and he says, all of these are needed on earth – but none of them will be needed in heaven. On the other hand, LOVE will exist forever. Heaven will be full of it. Nothing is greater.

So – what can we take away from this for ourselves? Well, we know God loves us. And the Bible tells us to love God and to love other people. Paul tells us that love is what gives real worth to our Christian service. But left to ourselves, we won't automatically have agape love . We need the virtuous circle – if we receive enough of God's love, then we'll be in a far better position to love others... And we can choose to love; we can choose to pass on that agape love that cares for the other person anyway. After all, when we've been treated really kindly and patiently, how can we be unkind and impatient – even when the other person IS really aggravating?! When we've been so much encouraged

and forgiven, how can we squash someone else – or throw back in their face that mistake they made before?

If we take just these four verses (1 Cor 13 : 4-7) about the nature of Love and keep them in our minds and hearts, think of the difference it could make. It would give God's Spirit the chance to challenge us whenever we begin to do the opposite : to envy instead of encourage; to take a sly pleasure in someone else's failure; to rush and criticise instead of being patient. The most important thing of all is to live life in LOVE – God's love – *'agape'* love.

Let it shape our attitude to the people we see as we travel about and the people we pass in the street. Let it shape our response to appeals for help from other parts of the world. Let it be the deciding factor in the way we approach our life partner, or our toddler, or our teenager, or our old friend, our new acquaintance, our colleague at work, the person living next door, the person sitting near us at coffee time.

It is the most excellent way. Amen.

Before we pray, I'd like to invite you to sit and close your eyes and listen to these wonderful 4 verses again. I'm going to read from another version and I'm going to read the verses twice. I'd like us to listen the first time thinking of ourselves – thinking of me myself - as God's loved child. And then the second time, to listen as one called to follow this way of living.

So – God is Love –

“Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail.”

Jesus calls us to love our neighbour –

“Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith hope, and patience never fail.”

Almighty and loving God,

Thank-you for loving us so completely.

Give us your love for others and teach us to follow in your way.

Fill us with your Holy Spirit, who encourages within us

love, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Amen.
