
⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends... ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13

A story is told of a pastor who was serving in a Parish during a vacancy. In this time, the Congregation had a working bee that involved many people, and that had the aim of painting and repairing the church building, church grounds, and manse. The locum pastor had been staying with parishioners, and also had been heavily involved throughout the week. When Sunday came, and after noting the community and care within the congregation, but also how very tired everyone was from the busy week, the pastor decided to preach the shortest sermon he could. So, as he entered the pulpit, he spoke one word "Love". Then after a moment of silence, he descended from the pulpit and the service continued.

For some, such a sort sermon might be very appealing. And certainly in that context, after seeing the connection in that community, it may have been appropriate for that one Sunday. But the simple reality is that in the life of the Christian church there is a debate about what true love 'is' and what it means to be 'loving' and 'caring'.

These days, in our 'modern' English language 'love' is such an elastic word. We move from talking about how we 'love' a certain flavour of ice-cream, to a particular style of music, to a sporting team (or the like), to a person.

'Love', then, in this scenario, often becomes what we believe we receive from another person or thing. 'Love' is what pleases 'us'. So it is, then, that people ultimately begin speaking about 'poor relationships' because they believe they are not 'getting enough out of it'. So it is that people drift into certain relationships because there is little understanding what it means to make a genuine commitment to another person. So it is, also, that people find it easy to complain about certain groups of people (especially their local Christian congregation), and to say people are not 'loving' and 'caring'. And even in this scenario we question the nature of God, and at times ask whether God Himself is truly loving and caring.

What is love?

Today, the second Bible reading in the world wide church's lectionary offers us the opportunity to reflect on what true love really is. And if we keep in mind the readings of the past few weeks from 1 Corinthians then the nature of true love is becomes most apparent.

The Apostle Paul wrote his sermon-letter to people who lived in Corinth - one of the very important towns of Bible times. Corinth was the major trading port of the Mediterranean world (and this ancient city itself was destroyed only in 1928 by an earthquake - with the modern city of Corinth built near the ruins). As residents of such an important city it was easy for people to think that by simply living there, they themselves were important.

However, the Christian people in the congregation of Corinth had also become obsessed about their spiritual gifts and abilities. In response, Paul wrote a letter-sermon to address his concerns. Paul began by commending the Corinthians for all the gifts and abilities they had, and said that they did not lack any gifts. Paul praised God for the gifts and abilities the people had. But then, in most of his letter-sermon Paul addressed the people about the poor attitudes people had in relation to such gifts. People had become 'turned in on themselves' and had been saying, "Look at the wonderful things we are doing."

Paul's correspondence reveals a congregation turned in on itself. People were comparing their gifts and abilities to try and see who was more "spiritual" (and therefore 'more important' or 'better looking – spiritually speaking'). People were living to please their own lives (hence also the discussion on sexual sins). Paul exposed these problems and said that without love (in the Greek, "agape"), spiritual gifts serve no good purpose.

In Greek mythology the story is told of a young man by the name of Narcissus, the son of a river god. Narcissus was a handsome man and many women fell in love with him and pursued him. But Narcissus rejected all advances. Among those who pursued him was a nymph called Echo. She herself had incurred the anger of the wife of the god Zeus, and was condemned never to speak again except to repeat what was said to her. Echo, therefore, was unable to tell Narcissus of her love.

One day, while walking in the wood, Narcissus was separated from his companions. When he shouted, "Is anyone here?" Echo joyfully answered 'Here, here!' Unable to see her hidden among the trees (and wondering who it was), Narcissus cried, "Come!" Back came the answer, "Come, come." Then Echo joyfully stepped out of the woods with outstretched arms towards Narcissus. But Narcissus cruelly refused to accept Echo's love. So humiliated was Echo that she hid in a cave until she wasted away and all that was left was her voice (hence the phrase today, "your echo").

To punish Narcissus the avenging god (whose name was 'Nemesis') made Narcissus fall hopelessly in love with his own beautiful face as he saw it reflected in a pool. As he gazed in fascination at his own face, he was unable to remove his gaze. Eventually he too faded away. And at the place Narcissus' body fell a beautiful flower grew to remember the name and story of Narcissus.

Our English language today still honours the names of those mentioned in this story. Echo and Nemesis are obvious. And Narcissus is remembered not only by a flower (called by that name today), but by the word 'narcissism' which means 'love of one self' or 'self-absorbed love'.

Much of what passes for 'love talk' in our world today is little more than emotional dribble and trite. Many pop songs speak about love. Similarly, many movies and shows on television occupy themselves about 'love' and 'relationships'. But much of our 'love talk' is essentially narcissistic – it's all about what pleases oneself... And like the Corinthians of old, we so often struggle in 'love' because we turn both the source and object of love toward ourselves.

One of the things we can do when we read One Corinthians 13:4-7 (is to replace our name at the place where love (or its pronoun 'it) is mentioned. We then gain an idea of the sort of love that God calls from us in our every day lives. But recently (as I have again reflected on this passage) this exercise has been troubling me. The reason for this is that the 'source' of love in this exercise (replacing one's name at the point 'love' is mentioned), is that the 'source' of love is oneself. And who can truly be like this...?

But if we also read the *whole* of First Corinthians chapter thirteen and place the name 'Jesus' in the place of 'love' we gain a far better idea about the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Indeed, we cannot put our name in the whole passage (1 Cor.13:1-13). But the name of Jesus most appropriately applies. True love is found in Jesus – in His life, death, resurrection and Ascension. Without Jesus we may have 'feelings' of love. But with Jesus there is a love which is eternal. As St. John says (1 Jn.4:7): 'Love comes from God!' Here friends, then, are two practical applications of this.

First, in the life of any Christian congregation there are times when we have disputes. We may even say that we do not want to associate with certain people in certain 'groups' because of these concerns. But again, we are called to reflect on the love that God has revealed in Jesus. In Jesus, and on the cross, God has defeated sin and death! In Jesus, on the cross, God has demonstrated His great love for you and for me. In Jesus, on the cross, God has given the great gift of forgiveness that transcends our human emotions. In Jesus we are eternally loved. That's God's covenant to us in baptism – a love that transcends all human emotion, knowledge and experience. This is also God's gift to us when we gather together in worship – a love that says 'You are forgiven!'

Second, in our lives we may be shattered at times of what people call 'bad news'. In the face of tragedy and sad events we may wonder as to the true nature of the love of God. 'How can such a thing occur?' we may ask in various ways. These sorts of questions are only human and natural. It's OK to ask our questions 'Why?' Indeed, Jesus Himself did as He hung on the cross in agony for you and for me.

But in the face of any questions directed towards God (in any way) we also need to be willing to look to God's own activity within human history to see His answer. And that answer, of course, is Jesus. At times we may ask our questions about God's 'love'. But in Christ Jesus we see that we are eternally loved' ('love never fails!'). In Jesus (in His agony on the cross and journey into the grave) He has defeated death. As the Apostle John writes (1 John 4:10-12): *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us."*

What amazing love comes from God! What amazing love, by His Spirit – comes from Jesus! God's love is a love that transcends not only our emotions and experiences. God's love is not only a love that not only transcends the troubles we have caused, and the troubles we have experienced. God's love is also a love that transcends even our death. And because this love comes from Jesus, we can rest assured that love will bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things. His love never fails. Let us rejoice in that love always. Amen.