
Let mutual love continue...
Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.
Hebrews 13:1, 8

In a "Peanuts" cartoon (with the main character 'Charlie Brown) little Lucy, who is known for her temper, approaches her brother Linus, who is watching TV. Linus says to Lucy, "I was here first, so I get to watch what I want." But without a word, Lucy marches to the television and switches to the channel she wants. Linus protests but Lucy assumes her know-it-all stance and proclaims, "In the 19th chapter of the book of Matthew it says, 'Many that are first will be last, and the last first.'" Linus replies, "I'll bet Matthew didn't have an older sister!"

What does it mean to love someone, and to be loved? In our world today we will get an assortment of answers

There are a lot of people today who like to speak about 'love' in the context of how one 'feels' about another person. Love is seen as something that comes from 'within' a person. Love is a 'feeling' that is 'generated' within oneself by some sort of mental effort or some sense of a 'spiritual force'. This sort of 'love' also has a significant focus on the self, and self-gratification. To 'know love' is to have someone look out for you.

But the writer to the Hebrews has another description of love (Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers... Remember those who are in prison... Let marriage be held in honour by all... Keep your lives free from the love of money... Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you... From Hebrews 13). At first he describes it as something you do towards other people. This sort of 'love' is practical. You entertain people in your homes (especially those who don't have others around to care for them). You care for those experiencing troubles in life (especially those of the faith). You respect your marriage partner, and other people in your home. You are content with what you have, knowing that God will take care of you. You respect your pastors and are loyal to your local congregation. Of course, such a list as this is not exhaustive. Elsewhere in Scripture there are many other descriptions of the practical ways you can show love in the world.

But there is an extra dimension to this 'love' that we as Christians need to remember. What makes a 'good deed' done by a Christian any different from one done by a non-Christian? On the outside, we have to say there is none. In fact we may even on all the 'good' many non-Christians 'do' in our world. And this ought to be recognised and celebrated. But there is an extra dimension to 'love' that the writer to the Hebrews gives us today – and it connected to Jesus and worship (and knowing worship as 'rest').

In most of the other New Testament books which speak about the way we are to act towards one another, it is done so on the basis of a discussion of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us. The letter to the Ephesians is a classic example of this. The first half is 'doctrine', reflecting on who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us. The second half is 'duty', exploring how we are to reflect that same love to the world. The idea is that because you know the love Jesus has given to you, you will also (as God's redeemed, and Spirit-filled people) seek to show that love to the world.

But the writer to the Hebrews – while reflecting on the great mysteries of the faith – also reflects on what it means to worship God in Christ. And the writer to the Hebrews cannot contemplate doing good and loving one another apart from worship of God. True 'love' is 'worship' of God – and 'worship' is not some thing we do to show our love for God. True worship is first really about how God shows (and gives) His love to us all.

In our world today there are many people living 'anxious lives'. Their hearts are troubled ('unrestful') by many things: deeds of the past; failed relationships; thoughts and words said or unsaid; accident or illness that trouble the soul; and so many other things. You don't need me to compile a list of what troubles people. We also know (perhaps personally) that there are many other people who on the 'outside' appear to be untroubled, but with quiet and sober reflection we can identify areas of unrest within. It is these who want rest for the soul. It is these who want to know they are loved. Indeed, we all want to know (in one way or another) that we are 'loved' and 'cared for'.

In our Christian worship we experience God's freedom and 'rest' and 'love'. When a pastor absolves you of your sin - in the stead, and by the command of Christ – we experience God's 'rest'. God says that everything of your past has been fully dealt with in Christ. You need not feel weighed down by anything in your past. Also, when you come to the table of the body and blood of our Lord, you experience God's 'rest'. Here Jesus gives you His life giving body and blood.

In effect He says, "I give you healing not only from all your sins, but for your bodies as well". Here Jesus gives us a special 'rest'. Here God pours His love into our hearts. And this is the love He has for all people.

Have you ever felt weighed down by God's call to 'love' all people? Have you ever felt like you weren't 'doing' enough? Are there times when you find it difficult (even towards members of your local congregation)? But we should never feel weighed down with the call to 'love one another'. Indeed, it should be the very opposite for us. It is not only a joyful call and command. It is also a celebration of God's love for us in Jesus.

How do we live our 'everyday life' for Jesus? There are many books being written today (an overabundance, perhaps) telling people how they are to live their lives – and how you can show 'love' to other people. Much of what is written is practical and helpful. But it so easy to be weighed down by what

these books (and various other Christian persons) have to say. So often, in this context, we find the call to love others as not being 'relaxing or easy or edifying or 'restful'. We'd rather stay at home and avoid one another so we don't feel too weighed down about this call to 'love one another'.

But whenever we feel like this it demonstrates that we do have been distracted (by the devil, and/or by the world, and/or by our sinful human nature) from that wonderful truth that we are loved by God in Jesus – and that His love is for us all. The writer to the Hebrews connects 'love' to Jesus and the real 'rest' that Jesus brings. And it is His love He gives in worship that will bring deep 'rest' to our souls. This is the special contribution that the writer to the Hebrews brings to the discussion of 'love'.

True worship is about 'rest'. It is about coming to God for comforting, grace and guidance in life. It is 'resting' in God's presence with all our sins, all our pains, and all our sorrows dealt with by Him. It is about knowing His love for us – and for all people in Jesus - who is the same 'yesterday and today and forever'.

When Christ said 'Love one another' this was never meant as a command to weigh us down and to make life difficult. Indeed, it is the very opposite. Yes – there are some very specific 'rights' and 'wrongs' for Christian living. But the writer to the Hebrews says, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.' And even though we may have 'ups' and 'downs' in our lives, Christ's love for us never changes. This is what we celebrate in Christian worship. This is the gift God gives you again this day.

Hebrews 13 can read like a list of rules – do this and don't do that... But true love also has an external dimension. We embody this way of life, not on the basis of our guilt or in any effort to secure God's favour, but because God's grace transforms and empowers us. Jesus, whose constancy knows no end, has opened for us a new way to God so that we may approach God's throne with confidence.

Within our Reading this day we have this beautiful verse: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." This is a verse that reminds us of God's constancy towards us. But as part of our Reading, there is another dimension (which is missed by the lectionary omitting verses 9-14). By leaping from verse 8 (about the constancy of Christ) to verse 15, the aim was likely to spare you several oddball, eye-glazing, and even grim sentences. Yet these are important. And these core verses are all about ... sacrifice (Heb.13:11-13: For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by His own blood. Let us then go to Him outside the camp and bear the abuse He endured).

Just as animals, whose blood was shed for Israel's sin, were burned outside the camp—so Jesus, whose life was given for our sake, was crucified outside

the city—and so we, who partake in this great gift, are likewise to meet Jesus outside the camp. It's a startling claim that reorients our days and puts us all in our place.

It is surely good to know that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. But this can become a mere slogan for 'self'. The following verses (Heb.13:11-13) remind us not just that Jesus is constant and true, but where and for whom. Like an ancient sacrifice, He is constant and true outside the camp, outside the city—beyond our zones of invented holiness, implicit respect, or imagined. His realm is 'out there' with the unlovely who are so hastily ignored, forgotten, and rejected. If that's where Jesus is found, and if we are one with Him in his dying and rising, then that's our abode as well. What a sweet gift and good news this is to know Jesus is there for us.

'Out there' Jesus abides, and our lasting life with Him, where our anxious life is exchanged for His life of constancy and love. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. His love for you never changes. This is God's good news for you. Let us live in that love. And let us celebrate that life of love with one another and this world, now and into eternity. Amen.