

## **Sermon – 1Corinthians13**

And now faith, hope and love abide, these three;  
and the greatest of these is love.

Over the course of this week, as I have been reflecting on the reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, I have continued to marvel at how beautiful the writing is, how almost poetic it sounds, and how connected it is to the messages about gifts and diversity that we have explored over the last two weeks. At the end of Chapter 12, Paul says, as an introduction to Chapter 13, "And I will show you a still more excellent way." And so follows this wonderful reflection on God's love that is quoted at weddings and, not unusually, also at funerals. Paul's nuanced use of the Greek word "agape" to describe the love of God is in contrast to other Greek words meaning love, such as the romantic or erotic love between two people, or the neighbourly love of people in community. As I've mentioned before, scripture can be interpreted in layers, and in this case it can be very tempting to almost wallow in the beauty of this writing, and not take a deep dive into the meaning behind the words. So today, I do want to take that deep dive with you and invite you to reflect on the meaning of God's love for you personally, for us as a community and for our community located within the broader Australian social structure.

So, Paul has just finished writing about the diversity of God given gifts among the worshipping people of Corinth and used the metaphor of the body and its members to emphasize how all gifts are necessary for the right functioning of the body of Christ. He points out that no gifts or talents are more important than another and all are interconnected. In Chapter 13 he takes this theme further, to say that all the gifts and talents we have or can imagine, are useless, if we don't have the love of God in our lives, motivating our actions and framing our existence. In no uncertain terms, Paul eloquently describes the significance of a lack of love, the nature of God's love and the endurance and impact of God's love. Paul, starts Chapter 13 with:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

We hear him directly referring to the gifts from the last chapter, tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, all necessary for the building up of the body of Christ, but if these gifts are not informed by love, not guided by love, they become offensive, like clanging cymbals. How often have we been hurt by someone not speaking in love, or how often have we ourselves hurt others, by not ensuring that love is motivating our own words? And without love, even our actions mean nothing, regardless of how seemingly well intentioned they might be, such as giving away all our possessions.

So, what does Paul mean by love? Most famously he says:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Perhaps we understand this more deeply if we take the English word love to reflect the concept behind the Greek word agape, God's love.

God's Love is patient; God's love is kind; God's love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. God's love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; God's love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. God's love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

As Christians, we receive the love of God poured into us by the Holy Spirit, and here Paul's description of God's love, as patient or kind, might sound banal or perhaps obvious, but cultivating these qualities consistently can be

very difficult. Only the love of God, and God's deep acceptance of our very ordinary humanity, enables us to face up to our own self-centeredness, our own rudeness, our own irritability, and to shine a light onto our inner darkness. It is God's love, God's grace that enables us to move past our own sin and strive for a better way.

And I invite you to take another step with this passage and substitute Jesus for Love.

Jesus is patient; Jesus is kind; Jesus is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.....Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

It is the love of God in Christ Jesus who helps us bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. Jesus endured the cross for us. Without Jesus, where is our belief? Where is our hope? Without the love of God in Jesus, how do we endure the challenges that life throws at us?

And Paul continues his reflection with:

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

Paul returns to his contrast between love and the spiritual gifts. He makes the point that prophesy or knowledge or any other gifts cannot be complete in this age, but love never ends. It is the manifestation of God, proceeding from God, a manifestation both clearer and more profound than any other gifts that we might have. Love never fails, and abides in us even in the age to come, when our knowledge of God will be complete, because it is the very nature and being of God.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Faith, hope and love. Nowhere else does Paul quite so clearly

combine these three words but it is clear that his thoughts are going this way, to represent them as the central and essential elements in Christianity.

And these essential elements of Christianity are the unifying elements of the body of Christ, in all our diversity, in all our humanness, in all our frailty.

At a personal level, God's love abiding in us, enables us to live in faith and hope. As Paul says, gifts are transient but faith, the thankful recognition of a gracious God, will be in place as long as God continues to be gracious. Faith is an eternal mark of the true relationship between God and person, and it follows that the life of the age to come will rest on faith as completely as life as a Christian does in the here and now. And hope, the perseverance in faith, is directed to what is not yet seen, patient endurance that finds the meaning of the moment not in itself but in God. Hope is the serene confidence that what God has given, God will maintain. At a personal level, as God's love abides in us, giving us faith and hope, we can be the best person that we can be, showing those Jesus like qualities of patience and kindness and casting aside the more human qualities of envy, arrogance or resentment. And this, faith, hope and love, is what enables us to build up Christian community, to create harmony and unity at both our interpersonal and community level.

In a few weeks' time, we will gather together to discern God's vision for our community. What will be the enduring principles that frame our time together? How will we express them? How will we work together to develop our way forward here in Lara and Little River, to bring the next generation of Christians into community? How will we as a community be visible to the outside world as a group identified by faith, hope and love?

These are questions that we all need to pray about over the next few weeks as we come to our Vision Day. Chapter 13 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is both a personal challenge to each and everyone of us, calling us to be the best person we can be in our daily lives, reflecting the indwelling of God's love, and it's also a clarion call for community. For it is only with God's love that we can indeed be a harmonious, healthy and growing

community. A community that is actively engaged with the world around us, that is confident in the faith and hope that God's love engenders within and among us, and that goes out into the world to let people know the difference that faith, hope and love, can make in our lives.

Let us pray.

Loving God, we give you thanks for the body of Christ here in Lara and Little River and for the faith, hope and love given to us through the Holy Spirit. Guide and help us to grow our community and confidently express ourselves as your people. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.