

## SERMON EPIPHANY 4, 3 FEBRUARY 2013

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Ps 71

1 Cor 13: 1-13

Luke 4: 21-30

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May the depth of your love open our ears and our eyes to the truth, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Last week we explored Paul's powerful and moving image of the body of Christ – a multi-faceted image calling us to mutual respect and understanding and to corporate action. The many gifts distributed through the body of Christ are for the community and for the building up of the church. They are for us now, as we are – partial and flawed. It is as Paul said elsewhere, in the Letter to the Ephesians: 'The gifts ... were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.' (Ephesians 4:11 – 12)

This understanding of Christian community is incredibly rich, with its echoes of eucharistic fellowship and promise of wholeness. Enough in itself, you might think. But Paul goes on and opens the way to a still deeper understanding, to an even richer vision of our lives as followers of Christ, to the very heartbeat of our relationship to God.

At the end of his careful explanation of what it means to be the body of Christ, he says, 'And I will show you a still more excellent way', (1 Cor 12:31) leading us into what is probably the most famous exposition of the nature of love that has ever been written. As fresh today as it was when Paul wrote it nearly 2000 years ago, this section of the First Letter to the Corinthians stands as one of the great achievements of human understanding. As I, and no doubt many clergy, have said at countless weddings, this is how God loves us: patiently, kindly, gently, self-givingly, courteously, honestly, endlessly. Inasmuch as we love each other in these ways, we are loving as God loves, capturing the essence of the divine.

Suddenly all those prized spiritual gifts mentioned in the preceding passage – prophecy, healing, discernment, miracles, tongues, teaching, leadership – melt into the background and we come to the core virtues of faith, hope and love. These are not spiritual gifts in the same way as the others. These seem to be the things that truly matter. They are of another order – things which 'abide', a quaintly old-fashioned word.

I am sure the translators have used 'abide' out of desperation. In an otherwise free-flowing and evocative translation it is a bit of a stumbling block, a word we simply don't use in everyday speech. It crops up in the hymn 'Abide with me', so often used at funerals, and in the notion of 'abiding sin' – neither of them particularly happy associations. Here it is being used to translate the Greek verb 'meno' – a common word with a cluster of meanings: dwelling,

abiding, living. It contains the idea of lasting, of continuing, of remaining or staying in a place or in a state, such as happiness.

And so these three – faith, hope and love – linger, remain, persist, last, endure... Faith – all that you stand for and believe in; hope – all that you dream of; and love - love is the essence of everything. Paul makes it clear that faith and hope abide now, in these times. But love is of another order, lasting even into eternity. It is the very nature of the triune God, and the fabric of the created order. Jesus, God with flesh on, shows us both what that means and how resistant we are to it.

Paul's lyrical outpouring on love is not without its difficulties. As perhaps only a scholar would do, New Testament critic Bill Loader asks: 'Does love really believe or endure all things?' He is concerned that the text might be used to argue that victims of violence or abuse should put up with it 'for love's sake', and suggests a better interpretation of the text might move in the direction of saying that love is unrestrained in its belief and endurance.

He also points to other dangers, particularly that of turning the text into a set of rules, of creating a series of 'oughts' and measuring ourselves and others against them. This is fraught with difficulty and risks tying people up in guilt or creating a set of expectations that are used as weapons in interpersonal relationships. Love is not like that. It has a life of its own, flowing from within us and from our relationship with God.

In this Letter to the Corinthians Paul is trying to curb their self-focussed arrogance and to teach them the primacy of other-focussed love, the love with which God loves us, all of us. Paul makes the point that although we know only in part, we are fully known by God. It is an unnerving thought – at least I find it so. All those less than admirable thoughts! All those embarrassing moments! All those things that I probably should not have done, let alone the ones I definitely should not have done (or thought). And yet we are fully known – and we are loved with this extraordinary, enduring, remorseless and yearning love described by St Paul. Whatever we think of ourselves, whatever others think of us, God sees the truth of us and loves us.

Surely this is good news for us all! And the good news does not stop there. For as we love, as we see the world through a loving lens, the world is transformed, and the unlovely become lovable. As the Easter hymn says: 'My song is love unknown, my Saviour's love to me, love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be'. Our own imperfections, together with those of others, are irrelevant. Love seeks us out, knows us, rejoices in us and transforms us.

In his poem 'Love finds a way home' Noel Davis leads us into a meditation on the transforming power of love:

Love finds a way home.  
Nothing, but nothing can restrain its desire  
to be at the heart of everything.

Into our resentment and our hate,  
into the cancer of our self-neglect  
love finds a way.

Into our pride and our unbelief,  
into the clots of our constraints  
love finds a way.

Into our guilt and our shame,  
into the paralysis of our fear  
love finds a way.

Into our defences and our knots,  
into the scar tissue of our hurts,  
love finds a way.

Into our addictions and our deceptions  
into the veins of our self-hate  
love finds a way.

Into our mania and our make-believe,  
down through the tunnels of our escapes  
love finds a way.

Oh yes love finds a way in where love has been locked out  
for love is a fire, love is a blade,  
love breaks open our hearts to each other  
and stays.<sup>1</sup>

‘And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is  
love.’ (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Amen.

Sarah Macneil  
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<sup>1</sup> Noel Davis, Heart Gone Walkabout, Shekinah Creative Ministry Co-op., 1991, p 129