



Sermon: - 19th November 2017

(Guild dedication service)

Go in Love ...

1 Corinthians 13; John 13: 31-38

A man was laying a new driveway. He had done all the preparation and all that remained was to lay the finishing layer of concrete. It was a perfect day for the task; not too hot, but clear and dry. He carefully mixed the concrete, equally carefully poured it, smoothed it over and left it to harden. Unfortunately, his next door neighbour's four year old was also enjoying the fine weather and decided to ride his bike, with stabilisers, right over the newly poured concrete. You can imagine the man's reaction. His language was, we might say, full of asterisks! "But, darling," said his wife mischievously, "I thought you loved children!" "I love them in the abstract," he replied, "not in the concrete!"

It's a sentiment echoed by Charlie Brown, the Peanuts character, "I love Mankind, it's people I can't stand!" and probably by all of us at some time. It's relatively easy to love humanity; to feel compassion for those who suffer through no fault of their own, or to feel admiration for those who triumph over adversity, to care about the trials of those we see on our television screens on an almost nightly basis. Victims of war, or weather, or the Grenfell Tower disaster. It's not so easy to love your neighbour, especially when that neighbour plays his music too loud, or lets his garden go to seed infesting your garden with weeds, or parks his car across your driveway. Yet Jesus tells us, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

It's a tough gig; and it gets tougher when we read Paul's description of the kind of love that God wants us to have for one another, outlined in 1 Corinthians. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." And if we look at these in more detail, it doesn't get any easier.

Love is patient. In the King James Version this is “longsuffering” and I think that’s a better translation. It better describes the way love, God’s love, never gives up on us, no matter how often we let him down, or make wrong choices. He’s always there, waiting, when we return. And it’s this kind of patience he asks of us too. Always ready to forgive and move on.

Love is kind, well that sounds easier, except sometimes it’s kinder to be tough, and that’s not so easy. As the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, “the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child.” In the same way, sometimes he wants our love to be tough, not always doing the easy thing, but rather doing the right thing. And working out what is the right thing to do can be pretty tough, too! It’s not always obvious.

Then, having told us what love is, Paul goes on to tell us what love is not.

Love does not envy. If we are truly loving we will rejoice in the success of others, yet our society encourages competition and envy. Forgive me if I told you this story before. A social scientist was doing some research amongst the people of the village in Africa. He placed a basket of sweets under a tree, drew a line in the sand, and said to the children, “the first one to reach the tree get all the sweets.” He said, “ready, steady, go.” The children all took one another’s hand and ran to the tree. When he asked them why they done that, they said, “how can one of us be happy if we are not happy.” If only there was more of that sort of attitude in the rich and prosperous West, there might indeed be more happiness.

Love does not boast. That one is maybe a little bit easier; our society is not known for its forbearance of those who set themselves up as better than others. We call it the tall poppy syndrome. Stick your head up above the rest and we’ll chop you down to size.

Love is not proud. And yet there is a right kind of pride, isn’t there? If we can’t be proud of what we achieve then we might be indulging in a false modesty. It’s okay to be realistic about our skills and talents. I think what this means is that what’s not okay is to think of ourselves as being better than others, or to take credit for things over which we have no control. If we work hard to achieve something then we can be proud of the efforts we made, but perhaps not of the skills we had in the first place, as we did nothing to achieve them, they are the gift of God.

Love does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking. I think this is related to love not being envious. Love allows others to succeed and is pleased by that success. Love is encouraging. Yet we

often find it difficult to be happy when others find success than we have failed to find. How often are we tempted to be discouraging and negative rather than building others up?

Love is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs. That one is easy to understand but difficult to do. The word Paul uses here for keeping no record of wrongs is a word that means bookkeeping. Love keeps no account of hurts and injuries, it doesn't hang on to reminders of wrongs done to us.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. If only that were true of our society today. There was a time when newspapers, for example, were interested in finding out the truth about situations. They were guardians of justice. No longer. Somebody recently said, "what is in the public interest to know, is not the same as what the public is interested in knowing!" Sadly, most newspapers nowadays seem to be more concerned with satisfying our prurient curiosity than with giving us the facts. As Christians we have a responsibility to seek out the truth and not be drawn into society's delight in the scandals and misfortunes of others.

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Paul began with two positives about love. He then gave us eight definitions of what love is not. He finishes with four more positives. The difficulty here is that word always. I think we could all happily admit to it sometimes protecting, sometimes trusting, sometimes hoping, sometimes persevering, but always?

The love described here is the love of Jesus Christ. If we substituted the word Christ for the word love, we would see a description of how Jesus behaved here on earth and how God treats us. If we were to substitute our name, or the word I, we would see how far we fall short. And it seems to me that there are three things to take from this.

The first is, that we do indeed fall short, and constantly need God's forbearance, love, and forgiveness. The second is that he gives us, without limit, his forbearance, his love, and his forgiveness. And the third is that our response surely must be to ask him to help us to be more loving, made over in his image, helping to build his kingdom, that all might experience his love. Be bold, be strong, go in love.