

SERMON: Sunday – 30 January 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Love is the greatest of all

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

Jesus says a prophet is not honoured in one's own town. He startles his listeners by recounting that in a time of famine it wasn't to Israel that Elijah went but to the foreign territory of Sidon. And in another time of crisis for Israel it wasn't to the land of his birth that Elisha was sent but to neighbouring Syria. It's there that faith is found. It's there that the prophets were heard and miracles happened.

None of this is to say that God had given up on Israel. Jesus isn't saying God doesn't care. But he does appear to be condemning faithlessness and by implication lovelessness.

A nation without faith soon dies.

And a nation without love soon dies.

If love is greatest then love is most needed.

In a world needy for love, Jesus comes to reveal what love looks like.

Surrounded by a mob desperately trying to throw him off the edge of the cliff for claiming to be God in the flesh, he walks right through the crowd.

.. he passed through the midst of them and went on his way (Luke 4:30 NRSV).

.. he walked right through the crowd, leaving them all stunned way (Luke 4:30 TPT).

You would imagine it not physically possible to do that. So something else is at work here, a greater Force, a love which prevails, despite the attempts to silence it or kill it.

This Love must be very powerful.

This Love that sets people free.

This Love that has the power to deliver and redeem people.

This Love that has the power to remove people from the midst of conflict.

This Love that has the power to change people's circumstances.

This Love that never gives up.

This Love that is consistently kind.

This Love that is a safe place to shelter.

This Love that bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things (13:7).

This Love that is greater than faith or prophecy.

As Paul said, "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" (1 Corinthians 13:2).

And the greatest of these is love (13:13).

This is not just a nice reading to have at weddings. It's the heart of the good news.

Paul writes a letter of love to a church struggling to be loving.

If you read the first twelve chapters of Paul's epistle, you get a fairly clear picture of what he's responding to when he describes the Corinthians' loveless piety as empty, futile, and discordant. The church has split into factions. People are pitting their favourite religious teachers against each other. Everyone's vying for power and prominence. Believers are taking each other to court. Those who speak in tongues believe they're superior to those who don't. People who shouldn't be sleeping with each other are doing so shamelessly. Worshippers are fighting over everything from food to circumcision to celibacy to head coverings. The Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, has devolved into drunkenness and gluttony, and the poor in the church are going hungry.

In other words, the Corinthian church is a church where all hell has broken loose. Far from honouring each other as fellow members of Christ's body, the

recipients of Paul's letter are tearing each other apart. While piety, self-righteousness, and spiritual one-upmanship are very much on display in their ranks, the love that never ends is not.

As a young religious zealot, Saul had lived a fairly loveless life until his encounter with Love on the Damascus Road changed everything. Only the completely transformed Paul (and the name change from Saul to Paul is deliberate) was able to write and talk about what love looked like following such an encounter.

Jesus came to reveal what love looks like. And he did so to Saul on the Damascus Road, blinding him for three days until he was raised to new sight.

It can be helpful to read Paul's passage on love and to replace the word "love" with "God" or "Jesus" or "Christ" and read the chapter again with the replacement word.

For example,

"Christ is patient, Christ is kind. Christ does not envy, does not boast, is not proud. Christ does not dishonour others, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs. Christ does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Christ always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Christ never fails.

So what does this all mean for the church? The church must be humble enough to be aware of her shortcomings but also to be so infused with love that others will want that love for themselves.

I read an interesting reflection this week by Andi from Open Table in Warrington, perhaps appropriate on a communion Sunday when we gather around a table which we'd want to be open to all.

His reflection was called, "Beyond 'welcome' and 'inclusivity'" and it called for the church to be more than a place that merely says everyone is welcome or describes itself as inclusive. He said this,

“I think we need to look beyond ‘inclusion’ (an intellectually problematic term) and ‘welcoming’ (which doesn’t go far enough) and become a radical movement that challenges the status quo, accepts and affirms people who are different, goes the ‘extra mile’, shows its love for those who are hurting, values diversity, and has a vision for serving humanity. If we were able to do that, rather than being pre-occupied by arguments with the conservatives among us, more people from our local communities may begin poking their heads into church once in a while. I don’t object to churches trying to be inclusive, but I think there is a calling to something beyond that.

- a responsibility to safeguard its community from harmful values and destructive intentions. The question is whether that is excluding, or simply protecting?”

He goes on to cite several Biblical examples of where Jesus actually excluded some people, for example the money changers from the Temple courts, or the rich young man whose material wealth kept him from the kingdom of God, or the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, I think his point was that there are actually times where it might not be safe for the church to include everyone without question.

Love includes rehabilitation and social justice and sometimes these need time to be worked out. Only after that might a full inclusion happen though there might be times where that doesn’t happen again in the same fellowship or relationship. Not all relationships can be restored to what they were before.

But Love can find a way. Nothing is impossible for Love. Love is the greatest.

Patient and kind

not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

does not insist on its own way; is not irritable or resentful;

does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

never ends.

Love is worth aiming for, striving for, adopting, embracing, making it our habit and the way to the kingdom of God.

Let us pray,
O Love that will not let us go
We rest our weary souls in Thee
Teach us what love looks like
That we may channel it freely
Trust in it completely
And delight in it eternally
In Jesus name
Amen.