

## Reflection 30/1/22

### Love

I sometimes listen to a Radio 4 podcast by Jeremy Vine called “What makes us human”. In it people in public life in the UK, politicians, religious leaders and sports personalities, fashion bloggers, disability activists and folk singers, share their thoughts on what they think makes us human. Their answers vary hugely. A sense of humour, our ability to ask questions, individuality, beauty, the fact that we can change and adapt, and our habit of forming family networks are some of the responses. Many of the answers are relational. If Paul could be invited onto the program, there is no doubt that his voice, reverberating across time would proclaim loud and clear that LOVE is what makes us human. Perhaps more specifically he would say, love is what makes us Christian.

It's kind of hard to talk and think about 1 Corinthians 13. It's such a well-known quote from scripture, and a beautiful piece of poetry. But let's give it a go anyway and see if we can't glean a few insights.

Maybe one of the first things to mention would be that 1 Corinthians 13 is not as we heard it today, a stand-alone chapter. Rather it comes about three quarters of the way through a letter from Paul to the early church in Corinth about a range of related subjects. Those are largely about how the new Christians are to live their lives individually and together, and their relationship with the society around them. So in other chapters Paul discusses divisions in the church, sexual integrity, food rules, the gathering, and lastly the resurrection. (The Bible Project). The theme of love undergirds the whole letter. Chapter 13 is the center-point of the section about the weekly gathering. In this section Paul speaks of different spiritual gifts and their place in the church community and time of worship. He emphasizes that these gifts are for the building up of the

community and that love is the fundamental quality that undergirds them all.

So 1 Corinthians 13, despite often being read at weddings was not really intended to be about romantic love.

The word used for the kind of love described here is “agape”, a Greek word adopted by the early Christians to describe ‘other-centered’ love as opposed to friendship, family or sexual love. A love which they experienced primarily through their connection with Jesus and their relationships with each other. (Barnett, 2000).

You heard Wendy read the list of qualities Paul identifies to describe this love...”love is patient, love is kind...”.

I just want to pause for a minute and give you time to think about your experience of love. What words would you use to describe love?

.....Does anyone feel bold enough to share a word or two? please speak up now. Or maybe you would like to discuss this over coffee later.

I’d also like to read you the same list in JB Phillip’s translation- a translation which sometimes has a freshness that can help us hear the words anew.

“<sup>4</sup> This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience—it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive: it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.

<sup>5-6</sup> Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good people when truth prevails.

7-8a Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.”

Another exercise suggested by one commentator (Fee 2014) is to put your own name in place of the word love. ie Fiona is patient, Fiona is kind etc and see how that feels....

A bit of a reality check, that one.....hmmm sometimes, well so long as I'm not in the middle of a night shift, actually there are times I am angry but that doesn't mean I don't love you, or no, I don't think that's a healthy quality for me to focus on!

These are just three different way to try to explore the text. I'd be interested to hear what you got from them.

I've drawn several conclusions.

One is that being a loving person is not at all easy and is probably a life-long endeavour.

Paul recognizes this when he says at the end of 1 Corinthians Chapter 12, "I will show you a more excellent WAY". His use of the word "way" implies to me that learning to love is a process with ups and downs, twists and turns."

Another is that the qualities of love are broader than the description in 1st Corinthians 13. As we have already noted, this passage was written to people in a particular set of circumstances, and the characteristics of love described, are those that that particular situation calls for from them. It is intriguing to wonder what Paul would include in a list to another community. Or what would be on the list Paul might send to US in OUR current situation?

I think it is important also to acknowledge that we can only ever love imperfectly. At the same time as Paul extolls the eternal, all-encompassing quality of love, he also describes humanity's limited perception and condition. He uses the images of being a child and

seeing through a mirror to show this. (in his day mirrors were not so clear as they are now at reflecting what is in front of them).

Paul accepts that our ability to offer other-centered “agape” love is naturally flawed. This does not mean we are excused from trying- the first words of the next chapter begin with the exhortation “Pursue love!”. But if it’s any consolation, despite his high- minded description of love, Paul himself seems to have had ongoing relationship difficulties with people in the church in Corinth as the second letter to the Corinthians reveals.

If we want to be thoughtful about what “love” means for us, it might be useful to have a clear idea of what it is. There is ongoing debate among psychologists about the relationship between thoughts and emotions. New Testament scholar Matthew Elliott in his book “Faithful feelings: rethinking emotion in the New Testament” describes love as essentially an emotion, which also involves reasoning, belief and action. He says

“Love is an emotion. As with any emotions, a Christian worldview will have unique reasons for love and distinct ideas about what action and behaviour it should motivate” (Elliott 2006)

It might be important to stay in touch with our lived experience of love as an emotion. Otherwise we may lose sight of the feelings of joy, excitement and freedom that give love its energy and delight.

If we see love merely in terms of action and behaviour, it could be easy to feel inadequate or overwhelmed, especially if we feel obliged to try to live up to Paul’s list of the characteristics of love

But love is not merely a burden or duty, though it can be hard work and asks that we be aware and intentional in our loving.

Neither is it something alien, unfriendly and beyond our reach. Rather it is something each of us have generally had the pleasure and

benefit of experiencing. We recognize it in others and discover it in ourselves and in our lives.

A couple of weeks ago at the Lectio Group we focussed on a poem by African American poet Robert Hayden. It's called "Those winter Sundays". In this poignant poem, the writer recalls his childhood, when his work-worn father would get up on bitter cold Sunday mornings to light the fire and polish his boy's shoes. He laments his lack of appreciation of his father's love at the time with these words.....

"What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?"

We do not always notice the expressions of love around us. Only in retrospect may we see these glimmers of love shining through the mists of time.

When I cast my mind back to recall the love that I have experienced, I remember my Mum spending the money she had saved when she stopped smoking to buy me my first flute. My Dad reading "The Hobbit" out loud to me and my sisters when we were really too old for that. The rollercoaster ride of falling in love. Meals cooked, books lent, discussions and challenges shared, risks taken, an arm round my shoulder or kind smile. Small insights given, joyful celebrations and feelings of connection with something beyond me. Not huge things, but real and sustaining.

At the end of each day, it can be useful before we doze off, to ask ourselves two questions- "Where did I receive love today?" and "How did I express love?" It is good to pause and give thanks for those experiences. That way those precious moments in our day won't pass us by.

And so as days pass into weeks, weeks into months and months into years, we may gradually become aware of the existence in our lives

of what JB Phillips calls “loves awful patient ways”. Movements and directions manifest themselves, interactions grow into relationships, and natural abilities become gifts shared as love draws us on.

In the rich depths of our lives we discover that love is real and an integral part of who we are.

What makes us human?

The spark of divine love within each of us.

What makes us human?

Love longing to flow out through us and into our world.

What makes us human?

Love makes us human,

Love makes us human.

References:

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