

Love, Because Nothing Else Matters

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 & Luke 4:21-30 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 January 2022

© LaughingBird.net

Message

The only measure of our progress in Christian faith is our love for others, including those we are least inclined to love.

Sermon

When we are reading the Bible, context is very important. If you read a verse or a passage in isolation and ignore its context, you can seriously distort its meaning. On the other hand, you can equally alter the way it is heard by placing it in a different context.

This is a danger every time we gather here and listen to readings from the Bible. Although we follow a set cycle of Bible readings, there are often questions that could be asked about the wisdom of where particular readings begin and end, and whether the inclusion of a few more verses either side might have given a clearer picture of what was going on in the passage. But that question can be a bit like peeling an onion, because as we have seen a number of times, some of the Biblical writers are constantly arranging stories so that they bounce off each other and you can end up needing to read pages and pages or even entire books to see all the nuances of the original context.

Similarly, there are issues of new contexts. When we read a passage of scripture in here and place it alongside other elements of the liturgy, perhaps a blessing of the children and a particular hymn or two, and alongside the news and concerns of the week, all these things have an impact on how we hear the biblical voice at any given time.

There is probably no better example of these issues than the passage we heard tonight from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. First Corinthians 13 is one of the best known passages in the Bible, but it is best known for being number one on the wedding hit parade, and in that context, Paul's hymn to love gets morphed into just another ode to the joys of having your own special someone in your life. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love," gets heard as "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have a special person who is the love of my life." And that is very definitely NOT what it is about. It is not opposing that; it's just not addressing that topic.

The actual context in Paul's letter points us in a very different direction, but even though we heard the lead up passage here last week, it is easy for the wedding echoes and a week's break to obscure the connection. After all, the readings don't always follow on directly from one week to another, so we can't be expected to immediately recognise that and factor it in, and some of us weren't here last week anyway. But if we did hear last week's extract and tonight's extract read in one continuous reading, the connection would be very obvious and explicit, because in the link verse between the two, the Apostle says, "So now, I will show you a much better way." Whatever he has just been talking about, this chapter on love is the "much better way." And in fact, Paul initially continues to refer back to what he has just been talking about, although it is easy to overlook that now, especially if you are hearing it at a wedding.

What Paul has just been talking about, as we heard last week, is the unity of the body of Christ – the Church – and the diversity of gifts within that body. And in particular, he is

challenging our tendency to get competitive about spiritual gifts and to start ranking each another according to the perceived importance of our various spiritual gifts.

So you will remember from last week that Paul was acknowledging that the gifts differ in their public prominence and in the extent to which they are for personal blessing or for sharing with the whole community, but that he was arguing strongly that these differences do not mean that the different people are more or less important or that some people are indispensable while others are expendable. "The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

So Paul finished up last week by encouraging us to strive for the gifts that are of most value in building up the whole community, but he then immediately says, "and now, I will show you a much better way." So now, hear the continued reference to spiritual gifts as today's extract begins:

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.

So, in a context of addressing a group of people who are comparing themselves to one another and competing over who is the most important and who ranks the highest on the scale of Christian maturity and giftedness and growth, Paul is thumping the pulpit and saying that the only measure that matters is the measure of your expression of love for one another.

All those other things they are using to rank themselves, he is saying, don't matter a bugger compared to the development of their love for one another. You could, he implies, be ranked number one on all the spectacular public gifts that enable you contribute massive amounts of valuable work to the community and the wider world, but if you can't match those gifts with an equal measure of love, then your contribution will be of very little value at all, especially to you. The only measure of who you are in Christ, and how far you have come on the journey into being like Jesus is the measure of your love.

And then in the heart of tonight's reading, the Apostle spells out what love looks like and how it behaves. He is not going to let us get away with talking the talk and not walking the walk. Love is known by its behaviour, not by words or sentiments. Let me express Paul's words in their negatives, so that we might hear them in a new way.

When your treatment of one another is not patient, it is not love. When it is not kind, then it is not love. When you are envious or boastful or arrogant or rude to one another, then you have ceased to love. When you insist on your own way, you are not loving. When you are irritable with one another or resentful of one another, you are not loving. When you take pleasure in wrongs done to another, or in lies told to another, or in any other kind of humiliation or misfortune of another, you cannot claim to have love. And if you do not have love, then you are all noise, and you gain nothing, and any other contribution you make will never compensate for it.

Now, let me take a risk here. I said before that there is a danger when we take a passage and put it in a new context. The message can be perceived differently when it is seen or heard

alongside something different to its original context. But sometimes that change of context might be valuable. It might enable us to see something that we should have seen in the first place. It might strip away some of misunderstandings created by other altering contexts, such as the wedding reading list. And although I'm taking a risk here, I'm fairly confident that the Apostle Paul would have no objection to his words about love being put alongside some of the things Jesus had to say about love.

So for example, when Paul says that love is the only thing that really matters and that we are nothing if we don't love, that seems to sit very comfortably alongside the words of Jesus when he said that the only commandments that really mattered were "love God" and "love your neighbour" and that all the rest of the teaching of the law and the prophets hangs on those two. In fact we know that Paul is cool with that, because he said exactly the same thing in his letter to the Romans.

But you might remember that when Jesus said that, someone asked "who is my neighbour?", Jesus didn't give a nice comfortable answer. He didn't say that the ultimate goal is to love your family. He didn't call Australians to love Ash Barty. It's good to love your family and to love Ash Barty, but it's hardly the big challenge that only a few can rise to.

When they asked Jesus "who is my neighbour?", he answered with the story of the good Samaritan. The Samaritans were anything but good in the eyes of the Israelites of Jesus's day, and they were certainly not regarded as good neighbours. They were other, outsiders, enemies. Which leads me to put Paul's words about love alongside Jesus's teaching in the gospel reading we heard tonight; a teaching that almost got him killed right here at the beginning of his public ministry, and which played no small part in eventually getting him killed three years later.

You see, what Jesus is saying here is essentially the same as the message of the story of the good Samaritan, except that instead of focussing on our responsibility to love the outsider and the enemy, Jesus is emphasising that God loves the outsider and the 'other' every bit as much as God loves the Israelites. So, if we now take Paul's chapter on love, and hear it in the context of Jesus's provocative teaching on love for outsiders and enemies, then perhaps it will come out something like this:

If I speak in the tongues, but do not love those who seek to destroy me, 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 love those who hate me and troll me and seek to humiliate me, 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 treat those who undermine me and betray me with patience, kindness, humility, endurance and hope, then I gain nothing. And if I respond with envy or boastfulness or arrogance or rudeness to those who piss me off, and if I insist on my own way and get irritable or resentful when I see them succeed or do well, then I do not have the love of Jesus.

Now all of that could just lead most of us to despair and to thinking that we've missed the boat and all our best efforts amount to nothing. But the good news is that we are not only on one side of the equation. This love is not only being demanded of us, but it is also being promised to us and lavished on us. For even if we totally refuse to love and behave as the most

bitter of hostile enemies towards God and everyone else, God still loves us with patience, kindness, humility, endurance and hope, and reaches out to us in Jesus, offering himself to us and for us and doing whatever it takes to love us back into the lovingness for which we were created. It is possible for us, all of us, to become people who love like Jesus, because Jesus's love for us will never give up until that happens, no matter how long it takes.

And it can actually be a mistake to focus too much attention on our capacity to love the outsiders and enemies. Because sometimes, they are away at a distance, and not really so much of a challenge, so it may sometimes be easier to love the members of the Afghan Taliban who hate me than it is to love the person I bump into several times a week who really gets up my nose. That's why the call to love does begin with love of our neighbours and even love of our own congregation and family. Love is always an action, not just a sentiment or theory. Love is as love does, or it is nothing.