



1 Corinthians 13.1-7
Luke 4.21-23
30th January 2022

Defining love by a different metric

Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.

In my late teens a friend and I practised up some hymns, one of us playing the organ, the other the piano and offered our services for the 6.30 evening gathering at church. My friend, who was already on the organ rota, phoned me midweek to say the church leaders had discussed our intention to offer both organ and piano that Sunday night and turned it down. Why? I said! Because that's not what we do at evening service, we just have the organ, came back the response.

I think we sometimes score 'own goals' in church life, and in my formative years that was a pretty big one.

There is, I suspect, little doubt that all church's have their own DNA, their own culture and way of doing things. That can be comforting, helpful and even enabling at times. Yet it can so easily become a substitute for faith if our security is in church routine rather than in God, who seems to have the irritating habit of not only comforting but also disturbing us in our worship together.

That certainly seems to be what's going on in the Nazareth synagogue in today's gospel. It's only Luke who gives us the inside story, Matthew and Mark have it but not the words Jesus preached.

Initially this was a well-received sermon, but it all turned sour by the end. Jesus is hounded out of town because it sounds like he insulted them. Actually, I don't think we have the full text in Luke, instead we have a dramatic story located in one place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry that sort of predicts what will happen in many places in the next three years. Jesus will upset people, especially religious people. It was often synagogue and temple folk who were offended by his teaching, whilst those on the margins lapped it up.

As Jesus challenged their traditions and questioned their theology, they became very possessive about the truths they thought they held and because they felt threatened, they started threatening him.

We can all do it. We can become angry Christians when some of our ways are challenged. And then we become guardians of an orthodoxy that has very little to do with the Way of Christ.

It seems to me that at Nazareth Jesus was confronting religious structures that were heavy.

I was interested to see in a recent visit to a Roman Catholic congregation in central London that the church there was running a group called Landings. A group for returning Catholics. I guess some of these would be people who moved away from church because they felt the structures of the church are too heavy. So, it was significant, and I think immensely helpful that the posters advertising this wonderful project said the group was run for returning Catholics by returning Catholics – not a church official in sight! A safe and welcoming space to help with a possible re-entry.

Now, in Corinth, from our other reading this morning, it was all very different, yet ironically essentially much the same.

1 Corinthians 13 is perhaps the best known and cherished passage ever written by Paul. I think as a piece of biblical poetry it's at the very top and no wonder we hear it at weddings and funerals because these words speak to our hearts and stir our souls.

Yet, we often miss their context; a context of church chaos, of leadership power stand offs and deep congregational divisions found in 1 Corinthians 12, just one chapter back.

If the synagogue at Nazareth was governed by stifling tradition, the church at Corinth was led by ego-centric leaders, and in both contexts, God is not honoured but misrepresented.

Paul knew that the Corinthian leaders made a big thing of speaking in tongues, giving words of knowledge or prophesy. They were proud of their so-called spiritual gifts, yet they often practised them at the expense of the congregation rather than for its up building. Displaying these gifts glorified them instead of pointing people to God. And Paul says we can speak in tongues or utter words of prophesy all day long, but if we don't do it in a spirit of communal love, we are just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. He didn't mince his words!

The leaders of the church at Corinth, according to chapter 12, were obsessed with power and had lost sight of love.

And that's why we have chapter 13 of this first letter to the Corinthians. This is the recovery disc. This is the rescue plan for a congregation that's lost its way.

So, in a way it's a bit ironic that these words are so popular at weddings because they are certainly not about romantic love. Of course, we can adapt them and find them helpful, but in their original context this was Paul's way of describing love using a different metric.

This isn't the sort of love that primarily makes you feel good. Instead, it's the sort that has the tenacity, the sheer Teflon coated strength, to hold together a very diverse community, one that might be full of tensions, yet if they can love like this there is a chance, with God's help, that they will manage to stick together.

Now, don't we need that way of loving in church life? Because, well it's my experience at least, churches are full of passionate individuals with strong opinions and diverse experiences. And those are the perfect ingredients for division. Indeed, I sometimes stand here and, I hope this isn't too insulting a thing to say, but if it is you can cast me out at 11.30 as there's precedent for that in Nazareth, - but I sometimes look at us on a Sunday morning and wonder what it is that brings us and keeps us together. And it's 1 Corinthians 13 love!

This love doesn't ask us all to agree or exist using the lowest common denominator. This love makes room for alternative opinions held with integrity. Yet this love also places upon us the discipline, and it is a discipline that needs practise, of mutual respect and the often frustrating, yet essential listening.

That's why the first characteristic of this love is patience. Isn't that significant. Perhaps we should put it into the membership vows. In joining AFC do you promise to be patient with your fellow church members. Don't rush to judgment, be patient in getting to know them. Don't dismiss them, be patient in trying to understand them. Just as our prayer is that people will be patient with us, with me.

The first characteristic of congregational love, says Paul, is patience.

What does he say – it's a wonderful litany, *Love is patient and kind. Love envies no one, is never boastful, never conceited, never rude; love is never selfish, never quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs.*

You read this by itself and it's good. Yet, read it in the context of chapter 12 which describes a church full of boasting and power games and it makes so much more sense as it hits the spot with cutting accuracy.

Paul asks the question: where is God located in church life? And the answer is, God is to be found in times, acts and moments of compassion, when love – 1 Corinthians 13 love – is shared and the congregation is 're-booted'.

Michael Portillo used to have a radio show with the title: *The Things we forgot to*

Remember. In it he went back over some of the lessons of history that have got lost.

If Paul founded the church at Corinth around AD50 and then wrote 1 Corinthians around AD53, this church is just one generation away from Jesus Christ, yet already they have forgotten to remember to love like him.

All too quickly we can think that church life is managed best by heavy rules or through powerful leaders. Both are inadequate.

The work of the Spirit is much more like gardening. It's about planting seed, watering, nurturing, watching, hoping and then the thrill of seeing small shoots emerge.

I never thought I'd hear myself say this from the pulpit, but we all need to become better 'gardeners' when it comes to church. We need to nurture among us an atmosphere of love that is patient, kind-hearted, long suffering and generous.

Such love honours God and sustains us, God's children.

I think I encountered that sort of love recently on a Chiltern Line train to Marylebone one Sunday morning.

Our carriage was almost empty, I mean it was early Sunday after all, just us at one end and a Caribbean family the other, two children, their bikes, their mum and gran. As we made our way through Ricky and Pinner, I couldn't help but overhear that Gran was giving the children a bible story, the tale of Jonah and the Whale. I was transfixed by the love and grace with which she spoke to her grandchildren and their enthusiastic interaction with her. They all got off at Harrow, I suspect to go to their church.

She was Gran the Gardner, sowing a seed, nurturing it with such devotion, wise in her gentleness and inspirational in her insight. She was a beautiful gift to her family, the gift of kind and gentle love, the sort that bears spiritual fruit.

It was, for me, a sermon on the train and an expression of the sort of love, says Paul, which can keep a family, a church and a community together.

May such love flourish among us today and always, in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.

