

Dorset South and West Circuit

Service for Sunday 14 February 2021 (Valentine's Day) by Tim Wells, Local Preacher .

As you begin to focus on and in God's presence, you might like to breathe in and out slowly, or simply keep silent - or to prepare in whichever way seems best for you.

I suggest that you then read the following service slowly - there is no need to rush! And so, firstly ...

A prayer of approach

My Lord and my God, take me from all that keeps me from thee.

My Lord and my God, grant me all that leads me to thee.

My Lord and my God, take me from myself and give me completely to thee.

Nicholas of Flue (1417-1487)

Hymn (STF503)

Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of Heaven to Earth come down

Fix in us Thy humble dwelling, All Thy faithful mercies crown.

Jesus, Thou art all compassion, Pure, unbounded love Thou art

Visit us with Thy salvation, Enter every trembling heart.

Come almighty to deliver, Let us all Thy life receive:

Suddenly return and never, Never more Thy temples leave

Thee we would be always blessing, Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,

Pray, and praise Thee without ceasing, Glory in Thy perfect love

Finish then Thy new creation, Pure and spotless let us be;

Let us see Thy great salvation, Perfectly restored in Thee.

Changed from glory into glory, 'Til in Heaven we take our place;

'Til we cast our crowns before Thee, Lost in wonder, love and praise.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Who was St Valentine?

St. Valentine was a Christian priest near Rome in about the year 270 A.D. At that time the Roman Emperor was imprisoning Christians for not worshipping the Roman gods.

During this persecution, Valentine was arrested. Some say he was arrested because he was performing Christian marriages, but others say it was for helping Christians escape prison.

During his trial, they asked Valentine what he thought of the Roman gods Jupiter and Mercury. Valentine said they were false gods and that the God that Christians worshipped was the only true God. So the Romans threw him in prison for insulting the gods.

While in prison, Valentine continued to minister. He witnessed to the guards. One of the guards was a good man who had adopted a blind girl. He asked Valentine if his God could help his daughter. Valentine prayed and the girl was given her sight. The guard and his whole family, 46 people, believed in Jesus and were baptized. Because these people had come to know Jesus, Valentine praised God right there in his prison cell. When the emperor heard about this he was furious that Valentine was still making converts even in prison, so he had Valentine beheaded.

Valentine had known that he might get caught in his Christian activities. He had known that if he told the court the truth about the Roman gods he would be thrown into prison. And he knew that if he continued to witness for Christ in prison, he would make his captors angry. But he continued, because he loved the Lord and his fellow humans.

He was willing to risk his life to help the prisoners and even the guards and to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who needed to hear it.

John's gospel says: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends". St. Valentine demonstrated this love when he died for his friends. This is the kind of love that Valentine's Day is really about.

Gospel reading.

John 13:34-35

Jesus said "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." (NIV)

Epistle Reading.

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (NIV)

Reflection

1. Apparently, one of the most consistently searched-for phrases on Google is the question: What is Love? Picking up on that, a newspaper article once asked five people from different walks of life for their response to the question "What is love?"

- A physicist said "Love is chemistry - a powerful neurological condition like hunger or thirst, only more permanent"
- A psychotherapist said "Love has many guises - unlike us, the ancients did not lump all the various emotions that we label "love" under the one word. They had several variations" (and, of course, this is reflected in the Bible).
- A philosopher said "Love is a passionate commitment - the answer to the question 'What is love' remains elusive in part because love is not one thing".
- A romantic novelist said "Love drives all great stories - what love is depends on where you are in relation to it"
- A nun said "Love is free, yet binds us - love is more easily experienced than defined. It cannot be bought or sold; there is nothing it cannot face; love is life's greatest blessing".

I don't know what you think of those answers – but there is clearly a common acceptance that Love exists, even if we can't really pin down what it is, and we can only make a vague response to the question.

2. John Lennon and Paul McCartney many years ago (yes, it is many years ago, now!) tried to grasp it by writing "All you need is love". And it seems to me that they are really and simply

expressing what is in the Bible, as we were reminded by our readings (though they did also add “It’s easy”, which unfortunately isn’t often the case).

3. Let’s think for a moment about Paul’s words to the young Christians at Corinth, in the famous passage which we call chapter 13 of his first letter to them. In these verses, Paul doesn’t exactly try to define Love, but he does write that it is more important than hope and even more important than faith. We rightly make much of faith, and yet Paul says that Love is even more important. I wonder how much we take that in? ... that Love is greater even than faith. Perhaps then a question for us is: Can what I believe sometimes get in the way of God’s love?

4. So many of the internal troubles which still beset the church throughout the world result from our arguments about doctrine, about what we believe, and also how we organise ourselves, and in our arguing, how easy it is to forget about God’s commandment to love. And to make our love for God and for one another more important than anything else.

I’m sure you can think of some current examples, but just think of all the troubles there have been in Northern Ireland over the years, and the problems there have been in our country over the centuries because people of faith have assumed that what they believe is right, and their beliefs are to them more important than showing Christian love.

I wonder what God thinks of an attitude like that? And yet, I wonder if we ever fail to love someone because we don’t agree with them in some way or other? Do we, I wonder, ever put faith before love?

5. Jesus said “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Note that Jesus doesn’t say that they will know you are my disciples “if you have great faith” or “if you pray morning and evening” or even “if you fellowship together every week”, which perhaps we might expect Him to say. Once again, you see, love is greater than all these other things, important though they are. Love is what matters above all.

6. So, why then is it so important, why is it at the centre of our faith, and why do we find it so difficult?

Surely it is crucial, and underpins our faith because Love is what God is – God is Love, not God has Love, or God is partly Love. And Paul says that nothing can separate us from the Love of God. And, aren’t we, as Christians, called to reflect what God is like, and therefore to reflect the fact that God is Love?

7. Why, then, do we find it so hard? Perhaps the reason we give is that we are “only human”, though, if we are Christians, that is really an excuse. Although, if we find it difficult to love in all circumstances, let’s not think we are unusual in this. The disciples quite clearly found it hard to love one another at times, let alone the people around them ... Jesus had chosen each one of His disciples despite (perhaps because of) their differences. I’m sure many of them wouldn’t have chosen some of the others to live their daily lives with. And yet they had to learn to love one another, and it wasn’t an instant change ... it took time – years in fact.

Perhaps the greatest example of how love had to develop over time is that of the apostle John. The disciple, who at the time of his calling by Jesus, had, collectively with his brother James, earned the nickname of the Sons of Thunder. And yet, perhaps thirty or forty years later, the disciple who could write words like:

“Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his fellow-Christian is still in darkness. Anyone who loves his fellow-Christian lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.” (1 John 2) (NIV)

The same man, and yet so different - John, the Son of Thunder had been transformed into John, the Apostle of Love.

8. Love is the chief sign of our faith. And, it seems, Jesus knows it needs to be learned. And it needs to be learned by being acted out:

“Show me your faith without works”, wrote James (another disciple writing later in life), “and I will show you my faith through my works”. And it’s not easy – certainly the disciples didn’t find it easy, and neither have Christians down through the ages. But we have to do it ... it’s not something which Jesus made optional ... “they will know you are my disciples if you have love one for another”. Remember, love is even greater than faith.

You may remember that, in the 1970s, badges with little Christian slogans on them became very popular for a time. The one I particularly remember (because I had one) read: “Be patient – God’s not finished with me yet”. Hopefully, that is still the case with all of us.

Prayers of Intercession

Most merciful Father, you have called us to be a caring Church, reflecting in our lives your infinite care for us, your children. Help us to fulfil our calling, and to care for one another in an unselfish fellowship of love; and to care for the world around us in sharing with it the good news of your love and serving those who suffer from poverty, hunger, and disease. We ask it in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

Michael Ramsey

The Lord’s Prayer

Hymn (STF372)

Come down, O love divine, seek thou this soul of mine, and visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear, and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn, til earthly passions turn to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let thy glorious light shine ever on my sight, and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

Let holy charity mine outward vesture be, and lowliness become mine inner clothing;
True lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part, and o’er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

And so the yearning strong, with which the soul will long, shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace, till they become the place wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.

Bianco da Siena (died 1434) Translated by RF Littledale (1833-1890)

Final prayer

Let us go to serve; go to love; go to bring healing; go to bring peace; go in the strength of the Father;
go in the power of Jesus; go united by the Spirit.

Amen.