

Love is ...

If, like me, you were around in the 1970s, you will remember the famous ‘*Love is...*’ cartoons created by New Zealand cartoonist Kim. One of her most famous drawings, ‘*Love is...being able to say you’re sorry*’ has been reproduced on cards, posters and t-towels for decades, and its sentiment is as true today as it was then. The cartoons started out as love notes that a woman made for her future husband. Here are some other of her most popular ones. I wonder which ones you’ll remember:

Love is ... a necessity, not a luxury

... caring for one another more each day

... finding time for each other

... making a fuss over him, though it’s only the sniffles

... not letting technology invade your leisure time

... seeing in him what others can’t see

... forever.

But, there are not the original ‘*Love is ...*’ sayings! Many centuries earlier, St Paul wrote a set – as we heard in today’s first reading. So why is Paul writing about love? Well, he’s having quite a time of it with the church in Corinth.

In the first century, Corinth was a large, prosperous trading city in southern Greece. It sat above a four-mile wide peninsula that joined southern Greece to the mainland, and all the trade between Italy and Asia passed through the two ports on either side onto a web of trade routes. After the city had been rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44BC, the Roman gods ruled, among whom Neptune, Venus and Cerus loomed large. But money was king and behaviour was loose. It was a cultured but decadent city with a variety of philosophers and religious teachers passing through, who influenced the citizens this way and that.

Paul first visited Corinth in AD 49/50. He was not the first Christian there but he did establish the church as a community. He stayed for 18 months, plying his trade as a tentmaker, and attending and preaching in the local synagogue, until the Jews took against his message and complained to Gallio, the proconsul for the province. You can read about this in Acts 18. But Gallio

refused to get involved. When Paul departed for Ephesus a short time after, he left behind a small church riven with factions.

One of the problems in Corinth was spiritual superiority in the community, so that those with certain gifts – especially speaking in tongues – thought themselves better than others. Paul didn't regard speaking in tongues as one of the higher gifts as, without being understood, it wasn't a gift that he considered built up the community. In chapter 12 of his letter, he talks of there being *'different kinds of gifts, but the work of the one and the same Spirit, given just as the Spirit determines.'* So, insisting that everyone speak in tongues was just plain nonsense, as not everyone is given the same, or indeed, every gift.

Speaking in tongues has, as we know, been viewed with significant caution over the centuries, so it was rather heartening to hear Archbishop Justin Welby in an interview a fortnight ago with Premier Christian Radio say that he prays in tongues every day as part of his morning prayers. Something as natural, he says, as brushing his teeth. *'It's not something to make a great song and dance about, given it's usually extremely early in the morning. It's not usually an immensely ecstatic moment,'* he told the interviewer.

The Archbishop's attitude, along with his openness to hearing from others through words of knowledge and prophecy, will be one shared by many Christians around the world, refreshed at hearing him voice what is also an important component of their own spiritual life, as it is mine. But it's something that the secular world, and indeed many other Christians, can find a little exotic, strange or worrying. In any case, speaking in tongues is a lot more common than many outside observers might assume. Often the gift is expressed in personal prayer and devotions. But you'll also find it happening collectively in public across the world as, every Sunday, worshippers in many churches, particularly Pentecostal and Charismatic, lift their voices to God.

But, it's been also described as a way to experience an intimate connection with God, that shortcuts the need for language, echoing St Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14 *'For anyone who speaks in a tongue, does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit.'*

But whereas Justin Welby speaks of tongues as *'not something to make a song and dance over'*, those with the gift of speaking in tongues in the church in

Corinth clearly thought that it was. They were 'lording' themselves over other Christians and making their fellow Christians feel inferior.

Reading between the lines, the divisions within the Corinthian church may have reflected differences in social status. Some had the leisure to arrive at church gatherings early, bringing plenty of food and drink. Others, maybe slaves, couldn't leave their work until much later, and had no means of contributing. Instead of this becoming an opportunity for sharing, those with nothing were left humiliated.

And, it's in the context of such un-Christian behaviour and conflict in the church that Paul writes at the end of chapter 12 a verse that really belongs at the start of chapter 13: '*And now I will show you the most excellent way.*' What is the most excellent way? It's the way of love.

And he launches into some very key teaching that has lasted the test of time. '*If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels,*' he says, '*but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. 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.*'

And what of Paul's definition of love? First-century Greek had three words for love. *Philia* covered general expressions of affection and friendship, but also the strong bonds between parents and children. *Eros* was reserved for sexual passion with its strong emotions. Neither were really suitable for Christian love. But there was another word, *agape*, a word that came to be used to describe the *unconditional love of God for all people: love as revealed in Jesus which is selfless and a model for everyone.*

The point that Paul is making in chapter 13, a chapter sandwiched between a huge discussion on spiritual gifts, that no matter what spiritual gifts a person may or may not have, the one thing that is indispensable is love. At the present time, our knowledge of God, our understanding of mysteries, our prophecies are limited; but when we see God face to face, then we will know God as much as we are now known by God. Whereas we won't need faith and hope once we are in the presence of God, love will always continue. So, you can be as religious as you like, but if you don't live a life grounded in love, it will count for nothing.

Paul then suggests what such love is like. A couple of years ago at a leadership conference, we were asked to put the word 'leadership' in place of the word 'love' and to see if we then agreed with the statements that followed – *'leadership is patient; leadership is kind.'* We all did. And then, lest we were tempted to think too highly of ourselves, we were challenged to put our *own* names in place of the word 'Love' and then read the verses afresh. So for me ... *'Lynda is patient, Lynda is kind. Lynda does not envy, Lynda does not boast...'* The challenge was to see how far we got before we realised how short we fell. I didn't get beyond the first sentence! Try it for yourself for a moment looking at the words and see how far you get.

But whether we actually ever achieve it, it's *this* type of love that we're to aim for in our relationships with each other. Talking about it is one thing; what might it mean in practical terms?

For me, agape love is what happens beyond the initial welcome on the door, to feeling a truly valued member of All Saints, where people genuinely ask *'How are you?'* and stay around long enough for the answer. And where you feel safe enough to be honest in your reply.

It's an arm around a shoulder when you notice someone weeping. It's a listening ear where the listener is deeply listening and where the silence of just being alongside someone is more powerful than any words spoken.

It's sending someone a note of thanks or encouragement of a job well done, or a card saying *'thinking and praying for you'* in times of worry, sadness and distress.

It's offering to help at Fellowship Tea or Messy Church, to make Christingles, to address and stuff envelopes, to provide a helping hand and welcome to a new or non-Christian that someone once gave you.

It's giving someone a lift to church, valuing their place in the church family, regardless of years. It's visiting someone who can't get here any longer because of frailty or illness, helping them to still feel part of the church family.

It's all of these things and much more. Paul says, *'And now I will show you the most excellent way.'* And he does. And that's what we're called to do, because the love we show not just benefits us as a community, but is also a tremendous witness to others. What does Jesus say about agape love? *'By this everyone will*

know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' Let's commit to do *just* that.

Let's pray:

Loving God,
help us each to recognise that your kingdom
will only begin to come when we live by your law of love –
loving our neighbours as ourselves,
and loving you, the source of all love.
We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ,
your love incarnate. Amen.