

What love?

'If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. 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 have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

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

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'

Why does Paul suggest that love is greater than hope?

Why does Paul say that love is greater than faith?

For Paul, faith and hope are great, but love is *all*.

The people to whom Paul is writing in his first letter to the Thessalonians are not those with whom he has had a long relationship. If we read Acts 17, we discover that the time physically spent with them was little more than two or three weeks. There was no prior relationship on which to build, and he hasn't been able to return. Paul's love for them, however, is evident in this passage. This love, as elsewhere in today's reading, is not about emotion, feeling or whim. It's not based on shared interests, characteristics or relationship. It's a choice – a choice to love people because of who they are: people loved by God. It's a love that was very costly for Paul – read the book of Acts to see how things turn out for him. It doesn't end well. But Paul continues on because, for him, his ministry, costly as it is, is simply a desire to share the love that he himself experienced from God. A love that results in love.

We know Paul's story well. On the road to Damascus, an angry Paul – known then as Saul – was on his way to deliver letters to the synagogues in Damascus. These letters had been signed by the high priest and gave Saul permission to arrest anyone found there who belonged to 'The Way' – followers of Jesus – and to bring them to Jerusalem as prisoners. But, on the outskirts of town, he

is dazzled by a blinding flash of light and, falling to the ground, he hears a voice: *'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'*

'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asks.

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' comes the reply.

On that dusty road, Paul discovers a different God to the one he'd grown up believing. For his murderous treatment of Jesus' followers, he might have expected to have been wiped out by an angry God of the ancient scriptures – but instead, he encounters love. He encounters Jesus. If you want to read the full story, it's in Acts chapter 9.

Why does Paul say that love is greater than hope, and greater than faith? Because both hope and faith require a foundation. And that foundation is love. It's love that creates the soil in which hope and faith can thrive. And it's love that leads Paul to tell the church in Thessalonica that it's through love that he was delighted to share the gospel of God with them, but not only the gospel but his life too, because they had become so dear to him.

In our reading today from Matthew's gospel, Jesus summed up the law and the prophets for a man who was struggling with the scriptures. Maybe that's a little generous, because it's more likely that the question asked by the 'expert in the law' was less a genuine question and more an opportunity to trap Jesus in his words.

The question asked of Jesus was not a complicated one. Verse 37 – *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind'* – is the Shema, the central prayer of Judaism, found in Deuteronomy 6. Verse 39 – *'Love your neighbour as yourself'* – is a summary, taken from Leviticus 19 of the Law of Moses. Together, they are all that God's people need to remember: Love God; love your neighbour as yourself. As the people of God, loved by God, we are to love God, and to let this love overflow to others and to ourselves. This is the choice we are to make.

One day, a child asked her grandmother, *'Nana, how much do you love me?'*

'This much,' answered her Nana, throwing her arms as wide as they could be.

'But why?' asked the little girl.

Her grandmother thought for a moment. Then she began to pour her cup of tea. The little girl watched, waiting. She poured ... and poured. The tea slowly filled the cup. It reached the brim.

'Nana!' the little girl exclaimed as the tea began to flow over the edge. 'It's spilling!'

But Nana continued to pour. Despite her granddaughter's protestations, they both watched as the tea filled the saucer, then spilled onto the table beneath. The child quietened; she watched as the tea puddled and began to drip off the edge onto the floor.

Eventually her Nana stopped pouring.

'I love God, and God loves me,' she explained. 'I have so much love in me, it just keeps overflowing to you!'

Where are *our* boundaries when it comes to love? 'Love your neighbour as yourself' has a pretty clear in-built boundary: loving others parallels how we love ourselves. Sometimes, though, it's the self-love that needs work. On a FB feed this week, a picture popped up with the words:

'And if I asked you to name all the things that you love, how long would it take to name yourself?' It's a good question.

Jesus modelled how this could look. He regularly took himself away from the crowds, and his followers, to spend time with God. He confronted inappropriate behaviour. As we love our neighbours, how do we ensure that we are also loving ourselves?

What we are asked to do is simple enough: it is to love. We are not asked to try to understand or solve every situation but simply to take the loving option – that is a lifelong solution and certainly not a quick fix. True love is costly and demanding. It involves the whole of our being.

I heard an inspiring preacher this week say that, for him, the whole story of God is summed up in this verse from the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament:

'Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death.'

As All Souls approaches – the time of the year where we remember those we've loved and lost – there are many of you here today who know that truth for yourself – that love is indeed stronger than death.

The question is how we live that truth in our daily lives. In Jewish traditions the Shema was a way of carrying God's law into daily life. We can do the same – we can memorise Scripture passages to recall God's presence in the joys and trials of daily living. Not just a reassurance in times of trial, but also to bring a transformational challenge into a situation we might otherwise prefer to ignore or walk away from, or hide in the voice of the majority. Perhaps we can take inspiration from, and pray for ourselves, Mother Theresa's prayer – the message of which someone summed up as: Be the change! It goes like this:

I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he would guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things.

Where does that strength come from? It comes from knowing that we are utterly loved. A love that cannot help but overflow to others.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'

Amen.