

*Limitless love*

Immorality, incest, legal disputes, drunkenness at the Lord's Supper... welcome to the church at Corinth! If you were checking out church websites back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, that's what you would have found at [church@corinth.com](http://church@corinth.com), at least if they were being honest about themselves. Life there seemed to be descending into chaos, and that was deeply painful to Paul who had founded this church. In the past couple of weeks we have touched on the kind of church that had formed in the ancient city of Corinth. In a city that was stamped with many of the deep social divisions that ran through the ancient world the church at Corinth had an opportunity to be a community like no other, bearing witness to a new way of life. This church had a chance to be a community where all the rules were changed, where the wealthy and poor, and the powerful and the powerless, and the slave and the free could sit down together and where those old contours of life in the ancient world could be redrawn. The church at Corinth, however, was losing the plot. All kinds of disputes and conflicts were arising and tearing the church apart. And yes, there was immorality and vice and lots of squabbling and in-fighting and through it all the old power-relations between haves and have-nots were being re-established. One particular feature of this community really angered Paul: when they gathered for worship and to break bread at the Lord's Supper the wealthy businessmen and their wives were turning up with big hampers of food – that's how they did the Lord's Supper in those days - and the servants and slaves who had to work before worship were arriving to find all the food gone and no doubt having to clean up the mess! And others were boasting about spiritual gifts that they had – some of them spoke in heavenly languages and others interpreted these messages from God and others prophesied and of course these people reckoned they were a cut above everyone else. And Paul is outraged. Is this the Body of Christ?

And it's into this situation that Paul writes the sublime 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of this letter, about love. It was written for a church in crisis, a conflicted church that was danger of becoming just like the society around it, yet which was supposed to offer an alternative, a contrast. So, let's be clear. We're used to hearing this passage read at weddings but it was not written for weddings! In

fact that's not even the kind of love that is being celebrated here. The love of 1 Corinthians 13 is what is called in Greek *agape*, and *agape* is not smoochy and romantic and erotic but is a very practical, sacrificial and demanding kind of love which, if we ever managed to actually live it, would revolutionise our lives and our world. And in order to get to the heart of this kind of love and this passage, I want us to consider especially words from verse 4 where Paul makes these short, concise statements: 'Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious...', until verse 7 where he says 'love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...' Or, as a good translation puts it, 'there is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance.' And the quality of love that Paul is touching on here is its expansive nature, the way it extends and extends boundaries. In the style of Paul's short, punchy statements I would sum up this section of the chapter by saying, 'Love pushes it!' Where we as human beings feel that we have reached a limit, where we think we are justified in drawing a line, in saying 'enough!' love – *agape* love – says, go one step further! Such love pushes the limits.

This, surely, is the nature of God's love. So, in the Old Testament we find God choosing the people of Israel to whom this kind of expansive love is demonstrated over and over again. You may recall that every year the Jews remember and celebrate what they call the Passover, when God liberated them from slavery in Egypt, leading them out through the Red Sea, parting the waters, and out into the wilderness where God cared for them and provided for them and led them and gave them the Law. And when the Jews celebrate Passover there is this litany that they say together, recounting God's great acts of liberation. And there is a refrain that they use, the Hebrew word 'dayenu' which means, 'it would have been enough!' So they say, 'it would have been enough – dayenu! - if God had brought us out of Egypt.' And it would have been enough – dayenu! – if God had parted the sea to allow us to escape. And it would have been enough – dayenu – if God had led us through the wilderness. And it would have been enough – dayenu – if God had given us God's Law. And so on – each 'it would have been enough!' is trumped by the next thing God did! Because that's what God's love is like – it constantly gives more. And then of course there are those moments in Israel's story when it is disobedient and rebellious and spurns God and God has had enough and is ready to have done with Israel and with good reason. And it would have been perfectly fair, perfectly just, if God had abandoned Israel and chosen someone else and in fact

God comes close to doing that several times. God's sorely tempted. But always God draws back and holds on and says, 'no, I cannot give you up!' Love stretches to embrace the sinner!

Of course such love was specially targeted at Israel but it was also pushed out beyond Israel to the other nations. That is what Jesus is reminding the people of Nazareth of in our reading from Luke's Gospel this morning. Jesus reminds his Jewish, synagogue audience that there were many starving widows in Israel in Elijah's time but he was sent to a non-Israelite in Sidon. And there were many lepers around in Israel in Elisha's time, but look who he healed – a man called Naaman who was a Syrian! That's divine love for you, pushing the boundaries, exceeding the limits, taking one step further than we are often prepared to go – and note the congregation's fury at Jesus's suggestion that divine love might stretch like that: they are ready to go out and lynch him! We prefer our love a little less extreme, a little more restrained.

This is the kind of love Jesus was talking about when he told us to love our enemies. You'd think it would be enough for us to love our neighbours, our friends. But Jesus pushes it further. No! That's not enough! Love your enemies That's what the story of the Good Samaritan is all about – a Samaritan helping his Jewish enemy who has been beaten up and robbed and who he would be justified in passing by on the other side. And it would have been enough if the Samaritan had tended to the wounded Jew, as he does, but he goes further – he takes him to an inn. And it would have been enough if he had left him there but the Samaritan insists on paying for his enemy's accommodation. And it would have been enough if he had paid for his enemy's accommodation but the Samaritan comes back later just that there isn't anything more to pay. This man just doesn't know when to stop. Love keeps pushing it!

This is the kind of love that was demonstrated in someone like Martin Luther King. King was adamant. This love is not primarily emotional. It's not about warm fuzzy feelings. It's an act of the will. It's about going the extra mile, turning the other cheek, refusing to retaliate. And I'm very conscious this morning, having our friends from South Africa here with this, that this is the kind of love that was expressed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up there after the apartheid era to deal with some of the appalling things that had happened during that period. The point of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was surely to say that justice is essential but justice is not enough.

Beyond justice lies forgiveness and reconciliation and that is where Christian love, *agape* takes us.

Love pushes it. Love says ‘dayenu – it would be enough to go thus far, but we are called to go further’. And I just wonder where this might speak to you this morning; where you might be called to go a step further, where you might be prompted to extend the boundaries of your love, your patience, your forbearing, your forgiveness. That’s how we imitate God. For ‘love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.’ Amen.

Loving God,  
limitless love,  
creating, saving, reaching out, blessing,  
we pray for your world this morning,  
our divided and conflicted world  
so in need of reconciliation and forgiveness  
and a love that goes one step further...  
We rejoice in being a congregation from  
So many places, so diverse.  
And as we worship this morning with our friends  
from South Africa we pray for them,  
that their time here may be blessed and fruitful.  
And we pray for the nation of South Africa,  
thankful for so much that has changed,  
grateful for so much that might once  
have been thought impossible,  
but praying for a country

still facing many problems and difficulties  
and where further change will be hard...

We pray for the government  
and we pray for the church in that land,  
that it may be a force for peace and justice  
and reconciliation and asking that you would  
bless its witness to the Gospel...

We pray for those here in our congregation  
who are going through testing times,  
who are struggling to love,  
struggling with hurt,  
struggling with their own limits  
but wanting to widen the circle of their love...

We pray for our sister Angela,  
returning home for a family bereavement;  
and for others struggling to cope with loss.

Enfold then with your love and empower them with hope...

We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ  
our Lord and Saviour. Amen.