

*Love pushes it*

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. A couple of weeks ago we 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 bear witness to something new. This church had become 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. Disputes and conflicts were arising and tearing the church apart 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 these people reckoned they were a cut above everyone else. And Paul is outraged. Is this the Body of Christ?

Well, 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, when it was supposed to offer an alternative, a contrast. So, let's be clear. We're used to hearing this passage read at weddings but that's not actually 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 focus on 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.’ The quality of love that Paul is touching on here is its expansive nature, the way it extends and pushes 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 and saying ‘enough!’ love – *agape* love – says, go further! Such love pushes the limits.

This is the love revealed in the Old Testament where time and time again God has just cause to abandon Israel and leave them to their own devices but every time God pushes it and says, ‘no, Israel, I cannot let you go’ And of course such love pushed out beyond the bounds of 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 of how in Elijah’s time God’s love reached out to a non-Israelite widow in Sidon; and in Elisha’s time that love pushed the boundaries to a Syrian leper called Naaman! There’s divine love for you, pushing the boundaries, generous and excessive – 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. They keep love on a short leash! But this is the kind of love Jesus demonstrates in reaching out to those who were seen as the ‘sinners’ of his day, people who were considered to be not just outside the law of God but also outside the love of God. But Jesus says to them, ‘God’s Kingdom begins here – with you!’ Here is divine love and it’s what must characterise Christians – the surplus, the extra, the excessive!

So this morning we gather at this table and meet this love coming to us in bread and wine: bread which in his day Jesus multiplied a thousand times, leaving baskets of left-overs; and wine, reminding us of the choice, connoisseur’s wine which Jesus produced out of water. Here is the generous God, the God of excess, the God who pushes it.

I wonder where this might speak to you this morning; where you might be called to go a step further, where you might be called to imitate God this way. For 'love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.' Amen.