

BCP services 2 March 2025

The Dean reflects on the meaning of love reflected in Paul's famous passage in the letter to the Corinthians and in the death of Jesus.

SERMON

Our reading from St Paul's letter to the Corinthians may be very familiar to you, perhaps in different translations, being read at weddings.

At the heart of it is the word translated here as "charity" and in other translations as "love" which is, in Greek, the word "agape".

The Greek philosophers distinguished *agape* from *philia*, fraternal love, such as the love between friends and comrades, and *eros*, romantic love or sexual desire. But it was in the Christian tradition that *agape* was understood as a divine category of love, God's self-sacrificing, compassionate love for us.

In other words, *agape* is love like no other. We can only get the tiniest glimpse of it, as Paul says, as though through a distorted mirror, or out of the corner of an eye. Human love is distorted by our very nature. We love because we are loved in return, we love because we admire someone's qualities and want some of that in our lives, we love because we are tied through family bonds. There is nearly always a pay-off for us.

There has been a lot of chatter recently around the personality of the current President of the United States, whose relationships are described as "transactional" meaning that he treats every relationship as though it were a business deal, asking "what is in it for me?". Donald Trump unashamedly moves through the world not disguising his motivations, but we should be wary of being too critical, since we are all doing something similar, though for most of us our self-interest is better disguised.

God's love is the opposite of transactional, it is free gift given without expectation of return. It is absolutely asymmetrical, since the difference between us and God is so great that nothing we do can possibly impact on God.

It is a love that runs through the Hebrew scripture in the concept of *hesed*, the loving kindness of God. The love that we see in the rescue of Noah and his family, XXXX, in the return of the people to Jerusalem, in each case love given despite people's wandering away from God, their rebellion, their seduction by foreign powers and foreign gods, their XXX

It is the love that we see most clearly in the death of Jesus, who was willing to die at our hands, not because he deserved to be punished by some vindictive ogre in the sky, but because he would not retaliate in the face of the abuse of power. It is the love that we see most clearly in the resurrection life of Jesus, who not only forgave those who had

abandoned him, but refused to add to their shame, instead entrusting them with the gospel, the good news, for the whole of humanity.

In his teaching, Jesus invites his followers to love – to love God, to love our neighbour, to love our enemies. But this does not always feel like good news, it can feel like an impossible demand, especially if we make the mistake of believing that we can love as an act of will. We know that is not possible. Love is always a supernatural gift, a gift of grace, divinely inspired.

The good news is that God does, just sometimes, give us the grace to love with holy, sacrificial, compassion.

You may have your own examples among those who have been given the capacity to love in this way. I often think of the example of Gordon Wilson, whose daughter was killed in an IRA bombing in the 1980's and who refused to condemn or express hate for those who had been responsible.

If you are interested, there is an extraordinary website, called The Forgiveness Project, which is full of such stories offered by people who have experienced the murder of children, rape and abuse in their own lives, by others who were child soldiers or gang members who have experienced the gift of forgiving themselves.

Forgiveness is one rich dimension of agape, it is love regardless, regardless of insult, regardless of hurt, regardless of slights to identity.

So where is the good news in Paul's letter to us today?

The good news is firstly the good news about the nature of God, who loves us unconditionally and completely, even when we struggle to love in return.

The good news is secondly the good news about the nature of Grace, which is freely given to us so that we can glimpse agape love in our lives.

The good news is thirdly the good news about our nature, which despite being so deeply flawed has that divine spark within it, that longing for God, that can orientate us in faith and hope.

As Lent approaches, let us turn our faces towards to loving kindness of God, focussing on the love poured out in the life and death of Jesus. Perhaps the greatest sacrifice we can make in this period is to give up our self-interest and to practice small acts of loving kindness and forgiveness, in gratitude for the unique act of love on the cross.