

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

4th September 2016

Spirit... come an inspire us.. .fill us with life again... the energy of love... to reshape us... hone us closer to your people... set free to be in love... with parish... with community... with neighbour... Come Spirit... send us into the fullness of life here... So be it... Amen...

I wonder if humanity is at its best... when it thinks in ideal terms... when it is inspired... when vision moves us more than the reality... and your soul soars with what must be possible... before the reality of our relationships come flooding back... and the balloon popping...

It was a bit like that at the festival and Celtic Concert last night... where the music was just fabulous... easy... skilled... and after a busy day of connecting with community... new things seemed possible... it felt good... and the balloon hasn't popped yet.. .

This morning... lets dare hold that balloon... that vision... that ideal... and find ourselves speaking like Paul more often...

Though... I have to admit... he really isn't my favourite person... I tend to avoid reading Paul... because he confuses me... I managed to avoid nearly every course I could on Paul at university... I don't know about you... but I find him quite convoluted... law and grace... and rules and redemption...

In university bible exams... thankfully we were allowed bibles in to the exam... an I never found I was able to remember Paul's ethics and arguments... but at the top of each page of your bible... there is a title that sums up what's in that page... I just copied that with a little imagination... it seemed to work... Paul has always been confusing to me...

Except here... In the midst of a long letter about a church falling out with itself... comes this passage... about love...

You'll hear it's fabulous

You'll hear this at so many weddings... I read it all the time at weddings... because it has so much to say... But it wasn't written for weddings... and isn't about marriage... and isn't advice for couples starting out in life...

It is the heart of Paul wrestling with a church in dispute with itself... to which we are no strangers ourselves... and these words are what Paul offers in reply...

Love is kind... patient... never conceited or arrogant...

Ever had one of those ridiculous moments when you read things like that... and that ideal part of you... imagines this is the answer to the world's problems...

This passage does this to me often... Can you imagine what it would be like if this passage was read every morning in parliament... before they debated war... welfare... Brexit... Idealism?... Well perhaps we shouldn't be so quick to get rid of idealism...

Or when Mr Trump meets Mr Pena Nieto of Mexico to talk about walls... read this passage first Mr Trump... Or when Syria's government and rebels face each other... read this before anything else...

Ideal... I know... but it might just shift the ground rules... Love is patient... love is kind... love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... It does not insist on its own way... it is not irritable or resentful... it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth...

You know... that is uncomfortable stuff when you read it in the different contexts we've just mentioned...

Nor can we avoid reading it in our own context too... Indeed... this is the first place for it to be read... regularly... daily... for the church has never been far from conflict... indeed even the gospel itself is divisive... How many ways is there to understand Paul... and fall out over him... let alone so much else...

But in a good book that causes division... there comes times... clear and consistent... when everything is reduced down to the meaning of it all... Faith, hope and love... and the greatest of these... is love... The Gospel... sorted...

But Paul is not on his own... Jesus accompanies him in such thinking... because when asked what is the most important rule... Jesus responds "Love God... and love neighbour... everything else is surplus"... Jesus is quite clear... that the whole gospel... and our whole relationship with each other and with God... is about love... everything else... is just padding... The gospel... sorted...

But both Jesus and Paul are joined by more... one prophet in particular called Hosea... in chapter eleven... where God has had it up to here with the Israelites... They've broken every rule... they've tried everything to wriggle out of the covenant relationship with God... and God is just about to run out of patience... when God says... I ought to destroy you as I did Zeboim... but my heart will not let me do it... I am God and not a human... my love for you is too strong...

So all the rules get lost in God's response to Israel... I cannot do it... my love for you is too strong... The gospel... sorted...

But not just Hosea... it goes much further back than that... when these same Israelites are in the wilderness finding themselves... and right there... in Deuteronomy... God tries to justify himself to the Israelites... and says... "I love you because... I love you"... That's what God says... that the whole ground of justification for the whole of our faith... our creation... our doctrine... our church... our creed... our relationship... is I love you... because I love you...

The gospel... sorted...

Now I don't want to sound like some ideal romantic... some wishy washy liberal... but it is just... personally... I can't see past this grounding of everything in love... There is nothing more... and if there is... then it is just commentary...

That includes what we say we believe or don't believe... what we insist on for people to join... what rules there are round communion, membership, presbytery plans... All of that is simply commentary... Love is the gospel... not doctrine... commitment... or what we say about Jesus...

Yet the church has been one of the main protagonists... in leading division... Remember Paul wrote these words of love in response to a church divided... He knows... the gospel of love... doesn't imagine... if we all just love each other everything will be fine... It realises you can't erase that division... or pretend it doesn't exist... or just cross your fingers to make it eventually go away...

But the gospel of love chooses to embrace more fully... how we live into these things... patiently... with humanity and kindness... not starting from a position of envy or boastful power... not lauding it over others with arrogance or being rude to each other with prejudice... It means living into that which divides without insisting on getting your own way... or starting with the premise your own thoughts are most important... and not to be irritated with other's points of view... or ways of living... or lifestyle... but rejoice in truth whenever you see it... hear it... or witness it being lived...

Love is patient... love is kind... love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... It does not insist on its own way... it is not irritable or resentful... it does not rejoice in wrongdoing... but rejoices in the truth...

It we were ever to proclaim what it means to be church... quote that... No... in fact quote nothing... live it... as we hopefully are doing this weekend as we celebrate with our community... and find creative meeting places to continue to build good relationships with each other... Enflesh these words... live the whole gospel in these words this weekend... and then Monday... the same as we did last Monday and every day of every week we are church... live the gospel of love... everything else is commentary...

For when we live like that... we work at a deeper level than the conscious... or the church... or the rules... Something deeper than ourselves comes through... from somewhere deep inside... something made all of God... for God is love...

References

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