

3 June 2018

The Power of Love



The Power of Love - 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Some of you were at our screening of the Royal Wedding on 18th May and if you were there or saw the wedding at home, you will, like me have been impressed by the sheer oratory power of the sermon given by Bishop Curry, head of the Episcopal Church from the USA. He exhorted the young couple to love, and to experience God's love as a force that can change the world. Here are some excerpts from it:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said: "We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that, we will be able to make of this old world a new world. Love is the only way."

There's power in love. Do not underestimate it. Anyone who has ever fallen in love, knows what I mean.

But think about love in any form or experience of it. It actually feels good to be loved, and to express love. There is something right about it. And there's a reason. An old medieval poem says it: "Where true love is found, God himself is there."

How does St. Paul say it?

Love is not jealous, rude, or boastful.

Love does not insist on its own way.

Love is unselfish, sacrificial, kind and just.

Love seeks the good and the well-being of the other.

Love makes room and space for the other to be. (See 1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

This love, this is the way of Jesus. And it's game changer.

Imagine our homes and families when this way of love is the way.

Imagine our neighbourhoods and communities when love is the way.

Imagine our governments and countries when love is the way.

Imagine business and commerce when this love is the way.

Imagine our world when love is the way.

No child would go to bed hungry in such a world as that

Poverty would become history in such a world as that.

The earth would be as a sanctuary in such a world as that.

We would treat one another as children of God, regardless of differences.

We would learn how to lay our swords and shields down by the riverside to study war no more.

There would be a new heaven, a new earth, a new world. A new and beautiful human family.

The very dream of God.

Hallelujah to all that, a very worthy dream and ideal. But it left me thinking, especially as I had already planned this sermon series on 1 Corinthians 13, why do I feel uncomfortable about the way he has said this at a wedding-then I realised that

at every wedding service and baptism I had been to and taken, I had always heard of love, but love expressed in practical ways, not as an ideal, because our own type of human love, romantic love when the world seems changed forever, when there are **Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels,**
the dizzy dancing that you feel,
when every fairy tale comes real,
I've looked at love that way,

as the singer Joni Mitchell said in her song **Clouds**,
and the fellow feeling love, when we discover a group of people who think and feel the same way as us, these types of love are all very well, but they are dependent on human emotion which as we all know is very fickle. We may when we are full of fellow feeling for others, believe that we can go and change the world, as Bishop Curry said, but why then is the world not changed yet. Why is the Episcopal Church in the USA in great decline, if they hear preaching like that of Bishop Curry each week? Perhaps it is because they have found that that sort of love does not last as long as they would like it to, if it dependent on how we feel.

In Daniel Bell's book "The End Of ideology" he muses why socialism, with all its ideals, has not taken hold in the USA, and he quotes an old Jewish tale

"The Rabbi of Zans used to tell this story about himself: In my youth when I was fired up with the love of God, I thought I would convert the whole world to God. But soon I discovered that it would be quite enough to convert the people who lived in my town, and I tried for a long time but did not succeed. Then I realised that my program was too ambitious, and I concentrated on my own household. But I could not convert them either. Finally it dawned on me; I must work on myself, so that I may give true service to God, But I did not even accomplish this." (Hasidic tale)

Or as St Paul puts it

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Rom 7,15,19)

So when I do a wedding sermon, it always includes two things my training incumbent taught me- self-giving and forgiving, because married life is not always easy. I do the same thing at a baptism service because being parents is not easy. You may want your married and family life to be full of loving feelings, but at 4.00 am when the baby has just woken up hungry, having filled its nappy and spread the contents all over the cot, is not, in my experience, the time when I have felt most loving. Love

was not a feeling but an act of the will. And it is the same when I am woken up in the night to go to the hospital to do a service of blessing for a stillborn baby, I do not feel terribly spiritual or loving, but it is my duty to go to the hospital comfort a couple in pain and I do it- it's my job. Some things we do for our families, for our church, for our jobs are part of duty, which we can call love, but there is not always high emotion in it. How do we keep going giving and serving like this? I think it is because we have God's self-giving love in us. This love is not from us, does not depend on whether we like the person we are serving or forgiving, but on what God thinks about them **'We love because God first loved us.'** (1 John 4:19) We love and forgive – not because the other is worthy of it in our eyes, but because God loves them and wants us to be the one who shows that love to others, whether we like them or not.

This is the love that is talked about in our passage that we are having our sermon series on in 1 Cor 13. The love that is called 'agape' love. Love that is **'poured into our hearts by the spirit.'** Rom 5:5, especially when we 'run dry.' The love that led Jesus to the cross for you and me. **"Joh 15:13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."**

Why is the world in such a mess? Someone wrote to the times 80 years ago and said, "What's wrong with the world. G.K. Chesterton, the Catholic writer wrote back in two words, " I am." The problem is that human beings are very self-centred creatures and often lack real agape love and therefore sin. The real problem is that they often justify their actions in the name of 'love', I loved this woman too much to give her up, said an adulterer. Or even I love my faith so much that everything has to be done my way. But where is the agape love, that seeks only to bless others and not to dominate, not be rude or self-seeking. That sort of love is only possible by self-discipline of giving and 'not counting the cost', of saying no to self and yes to God, making Him Lord of our lives, by believing in Him and then obeying Him, especially when we think we know best. When this sort of love is present in a church, when we love one another as Christ has loved us, then we truly can let our light shine before humankind, that they may see our good works and give praise to our Father in heaven. Easy? No, first we must deny self, take up the cross and follow Christ and do this daily.

Then we will not be at the mercy of our own emotions but we will be disciplined enough to say I want what God wants and be humble in our attitudes, like Jesus. Then we will not think that we can change the world on our own through our own love, like the Rabbi of Zans, and like, I am afraid to say, in my opinion, Bishop Curry implied.

1968 was a time of the hippy's demonstrations against the Vietnam war and the Woodstock festival- a time of casting off all restraint and the summer of 1968 was called the 'Summer of Love'. Did it work, did it last? No of course not, because it was a very self-centred sort of love of self-indulgence and lack of self-discipline. But we in St Andrew's are about to embark on our own sermon series of 1 Cor 13, we are going to have our own 'Summer of Love', but hopefully it will a Summer of looking at how we can be more loving and self-giving, after the pattern of Jesus, being humble, gentle kind and not holding a record of wrongs, and growing into a maturity of real genuine Christian love.

Yes Bishop Curry was right in that this sort of love will change the world, but not because we feel like it, but because God has so changed our hearts and attitudes from self-centredness- especially in the way we practice our faith, yes those attitudes and need to be changed so we are Christ like- impossible in our own strength, but possible with God.

I do wish Bishop Curry had spoken about the problems of life and how self-giving love was the answer, instead of giving what I consider was an impossible ideal. But at least it got people talking about sermons and God's love

Listen to this exchange from Fiddler on the roof. Tevye is a Jewish milkman, the father of 5 daughters, and he wants to know if his wife Golde, who has had a hard life, loves him.

(Tevye)"Golde I'm asking you a question..."Do you love me?

(Golde)

Do I love you?

For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes

Cooked your meals, cleaned your house

Given you children, milked the cow

After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?

Tevye) But do you love me?

(Golde)

Do I love him?

For twenty-five years I've lived with him

**Fought him, starved with him
Twenty-five years my bed is his
If that's not love, what is?
(Tevye)
Then you love me?
(Golde)
I suppose I do
(Tevye)
And I suppose I love you too
(Both)
It doesn't change a thing
But even so
After twenty-five years
It's nice to know**

That is the sort of love God is calling you to have for Him and the world, not what you feel, but what you do. Will you say Yes to God today? Will you say that that you love God, even though the ups and downs of life, do you still love Him and want to serve Him, that is the question that we face today, and we will be looking at it in more detail as the weeks go on.

“We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that, we will be able to make of this old world a new world. Love is the only way.”

“Where true love is found, God himself is there.”

Yes, Yes, but that love cannot be conjured up like a genie, and when our own emotions come and go, we need to depend on the power of God's self-giving and self-sacrificing love, and to keep on going back to Him when we are tired, angry, resentful, asking God why me, wondering whether it might be the 'others' turn to give for once. We keep going through suffering and pain because as Paul writes **we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Rom 5:3-5)**