

Relationships Love: 1: 1 Cor 13**1. The Context**

- The date 16 October 1555. The place is Oxford and you see before you two men being martyred for their Protestant faith during the reign of Queen Mary, daughter of Henry 8th; they are two English bishops Nicholas Ridley, one time bishop of Rochester and Hugh Latimer, one time bishop of Worcester. They burnt very slowly and suffered a great deal. Near the funeral pyre is a makeshift pulpit and at it stands a preacher by the name of Smith. What was his text? You guessed it his text was taken from 1 Corinthians 13 and was these words *"If I surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."* How cruel is that and how dangerous!
- So what is the context? Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians. The Corinthian Church was a new church and as such it was struggling. What did it mean to be a Christian in the Greco-Roman world? We all like to fit into our environment. They new they were free in Christ but what did that freedom mean? They were full of questions but they were very important questions because the church was being undermined by immorality and immaturity. How should they view the church? How should they view idols or sexuality? What should they do about marriage, women in the church and the gifts of the Spirit? They wanted to know - and they needed to know the answers to these and many other questions. Paul therefore breaks his letter down into a number of themes: (1) The theme of unity (Ch1-4); (2) Dealing with immorality (Ch 5-6) (3) Practical advice on marriage, meat sacrificed to idols and sensitivity to fellow believers (Ch7-10) and then he comes to spiritual gifts (Ch 12-14)

2. Chapter 13

- Chapter 13 comes in the middle of a section on how the Corinthian Christians should approach spiritual gifts - those special abilities that the Holy Spirit gives to believers. In Chapter 12 he lists some of the spiritual gifts - wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. He reminds the Corinthian Christians that the Church is like one body with many parts and that we all have a part to play. You remember the passage: ***The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"***²² Paul then goes on to list some of the ministries in the body - apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, gifts of healing helps, administration and tongues and ends with ***But eagerly desire the greater gifts.*** Then comes Chapter 13 followed by Chapter 14 which is largely devoted to the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy. So Chapter 13 comes as the filling in the sandwich. Right in the middle comes this tremendous passage on love which some regard as the very highest point of all Paul's writings. This great passage on the theme of LOVE.

3. Agape Love

- The word used throughout this passage in the Greek is ***Agape***, a word hardly known in the Greek language before New Testament times but almost redefined by its Christian usage. If one word could be said to sum up the Christian message this would be the word. Yet in Greek writing prior to New Testament times this word had never been used in this way before. It is though the Holy Spirit has by revelation uncovered a whole new meaning to the word. It expresses the idea of deep and constant love - that love that God has towards us - although we are entirely unworthy. It defines our love for God and God's love for us. and our love for our neighbour. This love is not a sudden impulse from our feelings. This love does not always run with our natural inclinations. It is not about loving those who we find it easy to love. It is a love that seeks the welfare of all and works no ill in anyone. It is a love that seeks to do good to all men - and especially but not exclusively to those who belong to the household of faith. This love expresses the essential nature of God, the love

that God has for us and the love that we are expected to have for Christian brethren and for the wider world.

- God is Love, and His love is very different from human love. God's love is unconditional, and it's not based on feelings or emotions. He doesn't love us because we're lovable or because we make Him feel good; He loves us because He is love. He created us to have a loving relationship with Him, and He sacrificed His own Son (who also willingly died for us) to restore that relationship. Can anyone really comprehend "unconditional" love? It seems the love that parents have for their children is as close to unconditional love as we can get without the help of God's love in our lives. We continue to love our children through good times and bad, and we don't stop loving them if they don't meet the expectations we may have for them. We make a choice to love our children even when we consider them unlovable; our love doesn't stop when we don't "feel" love for them. This is similar to God's love for us, but as we shall see, God's love transcends the human definition of love to a point that is hard for us to comprehend.
- The Christian usage of this term comes directly from the gospels and the gospel accounts of the teaching of Jesus. When asked what was the greatest commandment, **Jesus said, "Love (agapao) the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love (agapao) your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."** (Matthew 22:37-41)
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: **You have heard that it was said, 'Love (agapao) your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love (agapao) your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?**

4. The Message of Ch 13

- Firstly, we have to acknowledge that Paul is reprimanding the Corinthian Christians. Almost every line of this chapter would or should have made them feel guilty. The letter as a whole makes it clear that the Corinthian Christians had not been demonstrating love but pride, self-seeking, immorality, thoughtlessness, spiritual immaturity, etc, etc.
- Secondly, we also have to notice that this chapter on love is sandwiched between two chapters on spiritual gifts. This is not accidental but very intentional and this is not because Paul wants to limit, diminish or negate spiritual gifts in any way - in fact quite the contrary he tells us to eagerly desire the gifts and to be eager to prophesy.
- The central point of what Paul is saying is that for the Christian there is nothing more important, nothing more central, and nothing more engaging than agape, sacrificial love.
- Have you noticed how many programmes there are on television about buying and selling houses either in this country or abroad. Well imagine one of these programmes promoting a range of houses but in every case every single house was missing a roof! You would rightly say this is madness! Well, in the same way the exercise of any ministry in the Church, the exercise of any gift, the doing of any action is like a house without a roof if it is not done out of love. If you engage in any activity and that activity is not done out of love then, in Christian terms, it is not done out of the right motive.
- So, true is this that Paul takes it to the limit. Even though I have the faith to move a mountain - but have not love - the whole action is useless and worthless. You could be burnt alive for your faith or give everything away that you have for the poor but if that is

done from the wrong motive it is useless and worthless in the sight of God. Without love all our actions are bankrupt and without real eternal worth.

5. The Message Version

- Listen to how these thoughts are put in The Message version of the Bible:

So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

Love doesn't strut,

Doesn't have a swelled head,

Doesn't force itself on others,

Isn't always "me first,"

Doesn't fly off the handle,

Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,

Doesn't revel when others grovel,

Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,

Puts up with anything,

Trusts God always,

Always looks for the best,

Never looks back,

But keeps going to the end.

- Let's be clear this is not natural human love. It results from the work of the Spirit in the life of believers. This means that the Christian Church should be a very distinctive type of community - a community established on the principle of love. The Christian Church should be a haven of love in harsh world.
- This is why as Christians we should always be exploring ways to develop loving relationships and to be a caring and loving community. It is absolutely central to what we are about. It means men reaching out to men in a caring and concerned way. It means women reaching out to women, seniors to seniors, young to young, families to families. It means bridging all those links so that we aren't forming ghettos within the Church but that there is an openness and sharing between all. It means hospitality, it means practicality. Finding practical ways to show love and caring.
- It means over time developing links with the community and finding ways to actively share the love of Christ with those around us. It means developing the pastoral care of the Church so that we close up the holes in the net through which people pass through and drop out.
- At the moment we only dimly perceive all that God is and all that He has done for us and does do for us every day. Here Paul reminds us of this. We only see the Love of God as in a mirror or as the Message version puts it - through a fog or a mist but one day you and I will experience all this clearly. Now we know in part but then we shall know fully. Praise the Lord!! When all else has gone Paul tells us we will be left with three things - faith, hope and love - but the greatest of these is LOVE!

6. Love is the Magnet

- Love is the magnet that draws people in and draws people to Christ. Words are important, actions are important but ultimately love is the magnet. Remember, it is that same self-

giving love, strong love, that took Jesus to the cross. It is that eternal love that lies at the centre of all things. As Paul writes: ***Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be cancelled.***

7. John's Words

- Remember John's words in 1 John Ch 4v7-12, and with these I close....

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Questions and Reflections

1. If you heard this message what thoughts and reflections did it give you in relation to (a) yourself and (b) Heatherside Church?
2. What is the relationship between 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 to Chapter 13?
3. Why / How is agape love so different to human love?
4. How does 1 Corinthians 13 amplify the teaching of Jesus as revealed in the gospels?
5. What does the phrase 'unconditional love' mean or convey to you?
6. 'The Christian Church should be a haven of love in harsh world'. How do you think Heatherside Church rates and how can we improve the situation?
7. How can we demonstrate that agape love to the community around us?
8. Take some time to meditate on the (agape) love of God and then join in prayers of thanksgiving and praise for all that He has done for us.