

Worshipping God Together : Apart
Sunday 30th January 2022 at 10.30am
Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United
Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

A Call to Worship God

I come into the light and love of the Father who calls us his children.
I come into the glow of my Christian family –
apart and yet together in spirit.
May God's love burn within us.
May hard hearts melt like wax, and God's love shine in our faces
So, I come and worship God, who is Love

Hymn – R&S 95: MP 187: (Tune: Abbots Leigh) *Timothy Rees (1874-1939)**

God is love: let heaven adore him; God is love: let earth rejoice;
let creation sing before him, and exalt him with one voice.
He who laid the earth's foundation, he who spread the heavens above,
he who breathes through all creation, he is love, eternal love.

God is love, and is enfolding all the world in one embrace;
his unfailing grasp is holding every child of every race;
and when human hearts are breaking under sorrow's iron rod,
that same sorrow, that same aching wrings with pain the heart of God.

God is love: and though with blindness sin afflicts and clouds the will,
God's eternal loving-kindness holds us fast and guides us still.
Sin and death and hell shall never o'er us final triumph gain;
God is love, so Love for ever o'er the universe must reign.

Now, turn to God, who is love, in prayer.

Approaching God in Prayer

Father God, from before we were babies,
since we were waiting to be born,
you were there, knowing and loving us.

Thank you for being there then;
and thank you for being here today.

Lord God, our understanding of love is frail and faltering,
we cannot even understand the loves in our earthly lives.

And so, we look to you as we learn and explore what love is.
Lead us, Lord, so that we may grow in love towards you
and towards one another.

Lord God of love, who is love, and who gives love –
we worship and adore you as the source of all love.
We don't join in the cult of love as the world knows it,
because we are not slaves to the shallow love of light romance
and fleeting fancy.

We turn our faces to the illumination of your love,
as the moon reflects the light of the sun,
so that we may share the true love that comes from you.
We look to your light and we marvel in your majesty
we revel in the rapture of being loved by you.

Father God, when we use the word 'love' it so often lacks meaning –
'I love chocolate!' 'I love Saturdays!'

We say it of so many things, yet we find it hard to say to people –
except to our nearest and dearest.

And maybe we even find it difficult with them.

We are hesitant about showing it, too.

We don't want to seem over-friendly or too eager.

Or maybe we're just lazy sometimes.

Lord, we confess that we are confused about love!

Its complexities baffle and overwhelm us,
often leaving us tongue-tied and inactive when it's needed most.

We don't always receive it well, either;
we're too proud, or suspicious of motive,

we freeze, our hearts and minds closed.

Teach us about the love you give, Lord,
so that we might know how to share it, to your glory,
just as people have shared your love with us.

Help us to follow the example you gave to us in Jesus, your Son,
your love – divine and human given to us and for us.

Help me to remember his pattern for life, as I say the prayer he taught
us

Our Father, who art in heaven...

'Listen' for God's Word as you read from the book of the Prophet
Jeremiah and then the words of the Apostle Paul

Bible Reading – Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10

The call of Jeremiah

⁴ The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

⁵ 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'

⁶ 'Alas, Sovereign LORD,' I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am too
young.'

⁷ But the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, "I am too young." You must go
to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not
be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,' declares
the LORD.

⁹ Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said
to me, 'I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you
over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and
overthrow, to build and to plant.'

New Testament Reading – 1 Corinthians 13: 1 – 13

The Gift of Love

13 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. **2** And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. **3** If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,^[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant **5** or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; **6** it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. **7** It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. **9** For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; **10** but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. **11** When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. **12** For now we see in a mirror, dimly,^[b] but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. **13** And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Setting the Scene

Do you remember the ‘Love is...’ series of cartoons? They started appearing in newspapers 50 or so years ago.

Apparently, the cartoons started out as love notes that a woman made for her future husband. But they are *not* the original ‘Love is...’

sayings! Many centuries earlier, Paul wrote some 'Love is...' sayings – as you have read

As well as 'Love is...', we also read (and sung) that 'God is love'. So, using Paul's words, we could say, 'God is patient, God is kind' and so on.

But we are called to be like God. So perhaps you should put your own name into Paul's words – or maybe just 'I'.

I am patient... I am kind... I am not envious... I never insist on my own way... I do not rejoice in wrongdoing... I rejoice in the truth... etc...

I wonder, how far can you get through the list before you know you're saying something that isn't quite true?

None of us is that perfect! It's hard to live like this.

But these *are* the characteristics of God's love, and they are a high calling for us as individuals. But this is God's love – and we have to try to demonstrate it as his followers.

However, these words are Paul's encouragement to Church congregations, pointing out that they are to work together to demonstrate God's love in their behaviour as a whole Church. At its richest, this passage applies to our life together in community.

And through these words, written 2,000 years ago, Paul encourages us, challenges us as Church Communities to do exactly the same.

So as Churches, we must ask ourselves, are we patient, kind, not envious, boastful or rude, do we rejoice in the truth and not in wrongdoing, do we never insist on our own way?

None of us as individuals or as Church communities is perfect, but, how might we need to change to become better at loving in the ways that Paul describes?

What difference will it make to us, and to others, when we do?

And what actions might this kind of love lead us into taking?

How do Paul's words about love challenge us as Churches to be more generous in giving our love to those most in need of it?

Dare we take on the challenge of loving like this?

Love finds us out (Prayer Handbook 2016 Hidden in Plain Sight. P. 13 John Proctor)

God of love, the trouble with your love is that it finds us out.

'Patient and kind' – well, not always;

'not irritable or resentful' – on our better days;

'rejoicing in the truth' – when it suits us;

'not arrogant or rude' – depending on the company we're in.

To be honest – and we'd better be honest with you – there is something of the noisy gong and clanging cymbal about us and our Christian living.

We can be hollow, half hearted, superficial, shallow, selfish.

So we thank you, God of love, for the other side of your love, that it pardons us and puts us together;

that the love of the cross of Christ takes us as we are and makes us more truly the people we ought to be.

We would rather live with your love than ignore it.

We would rather accept its challenge, receive its healing and make it the centre of our lives.

So, once again we thank you, humbly and confidently, for loving us.
In Jesus Name

Amen

Hymn – R&S 474: (MP 1261)

Richard Gillard. (1953-) altd.

Brother, Sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey, and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, Sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

Gospel Reading **Luke 4: 20 – 30** *(the story continues from last week...)*

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' ²³ He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."' ²⁴ And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months,

and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers^[d] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’ ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Reflections

Jesus knew that there are costs to the kind of loving Paul speaks about – of course, it was from Jesus’ experience that Paul came to understand the cost of loving.

Jesus reminds his hometown that God’s grace and generosity is not reserved for those who – whether family, friends or neighbours – think they deserve it. God’s grace and love is risky, perhaps even scandalous. It’s for outsiders and outcasts.

Jesus discovers the cost of loving when he speaks out and tells this truth to those who think they know him the best. In fact, loving like this is enough to get you run out of town.

Paul says that the Corinthian Christian Church should ‘strive for the greater gifts’ and he ‘will show them a more excellent way’, and that way is love. Paul gives an account of Christian love, or ‘*agape*’.

Unlike English, first-century Greek had three words for love.

‘*Philia*’ covered general expressions of affection and friendship, but also the strong bonds between parents and children, brothers and sisters. Whilst ‘*Eros*’ was reserved for sexual passion with its strong emotions.

Neither of these were suitable for Christian love: the love of God for his Son that is reflected in the love that Christians should cultivate for each other and for the entirety of humankind.

This love is encompassed in the word 'agape', a word not much used at the time. It was a relatively 'clean' word that could be filled with meaning. So, it became the word commonly used in the New Testament for a distinctively Christian love, something not based on emotion, and not limited to friends and family. In fact, it should be extended to our enemies. Matthew tells us that Jesus said 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'.

This letter to the Church in Corinth is not the only place where Paul talks about this 'agape' the word appears in each and every one of his letters.

So, this Christian love is not self-seeking, it's a love that extends out to everyone – even our enemies. It is sacrificial, it is accepting, it is enduring – and so much more!

As always, it's important to look at the context for this chapter of Paul's letter to the early Church in Corinth. It's sandwiched inside a discussion about spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14.

Some people, he says, have the higher gifts, some more modest ones, but all our gifts contribute to the whole body of Christ.

The point Paul makes here in chapter 13 is that no matter what spiritual gifts a person may or may not have, the one thing that is indispensable, no matter what, is love.

At the present time, our knowledge of God, our understanding of the mysteries, and our prophecies are limited.

But 'then'! Paul says, in death, we will see God face-to-face and 'then' we will *know* God as much as we are now known by God! 'Then' we

will know fully and accept the grace and care of a loving God and find God's astonishing beauty in it!

Our conversation with God will *continue* with God, face-to-face, and through it, what we have only been able to see dimly in this earthly life, we will be able to see face-to-face!

Love will continue, while faith and hope and the other gifts will not. We won't need faith and hope once we're in the presence of God, whereas love endures – Love is our aim and our goal, it's the beginning and ending of all things.

Paul teaches us that you can be a prophet like Jeremiah, and so many others, we can say all the right things, we can be deeply religious in thinking and practice, but if we don't live a life grounded in love, it will count for nothing.

Love is the greatest gift, and the most enduring aspect of our life in God. This is, perhaps, because if God is love, it is by exercising this distinctively Christian love that we are brought closest to God's heart.

Paul goes as far as saying that in the end a life grounded in love is greater than one grounded in faith alone, it's also love that will save us.

Hymn – R&S 294: MP 89: *Bianco Da Siena (d. 1434) tr. R. F. Littledale (1833-90)*

Come down, O Love Divine,
seek thou this soul of mine,
and visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn, till earthly passions turn
to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
and let thy glorious light shine ever on my sight,
and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.



image: www.unsplash.com: Nick Fewings @jannerboy62

Let holy charity mine outward vesture be,
and lowliness become mine inner clothing;
true lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part,
and o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing-

And so the yearning strong with which the soul will long,
shall far outpass the power of human telling;
for none can guess its grace, till he become the place
wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.

Holding the World in Prayer

Meet God in prayer again

Come near, Lord God, and listen for the prayers of my heart...

Living God, your love streams and flows like a river,
quenching our parched lives, refreshing and cleansing us.

Father God, we pray for all who are lacking in love;
for those who do not receive the love they need;
for those who cannot show love to others.

Shine your love upon us, Lord,
so that we might reflect it out into the world.

Help us to live your love in our actions,
especially towards those we find it hard to love.

As we bring before you those who are sick in body or mind,
or bereaved, or lonely, or lost,
we pray that you will enable us to share the love
that is considerate, patient, wise and appropriate –
the right kind of love for each person in their situation.

We pray for those people known to us – to me –
whose names I lift before you now in a time of quiet

Keep a time of Silence.....

As I join my love with your love, Lord God,
may they come to know your peace, your healing and your grace.

And I pray for myself,
for the strength and courage and resources
to meet the challenges of each day.
So, may love be the force that drives me and the power that binds us.

Accept our love, and lead us on, reborn, refreshed and renewed,
through Jesus Christ our Rescuer, Companion and Friend. Amen.

Hymn – R&S 663: MP 449: (Tune: Blaenwern) *Charles Wesley (1707-88)*

Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down!
fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver, let us all thy grace receive;
suddenly return, and never, never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing, serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing, glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee!
changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place;
till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.

Closing Words and Blessing

Let the pure light of God's love shine through you.
Share with the world the full spectrum of love,
illuminating the darkest corners like a candle in the night. Amen.
May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen

*Hymn words reproduced under the CCLI Licence numbers of the SPACE Group of Churches:
178113 – Heckmondwike URC: 177949 - Longcauseway Church: 1236906 - Norristhorpe
URC: 783508 - Ravensthorpe with Hopton URC*