

30 January 2022

Jeremiah 1:4-10
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know fully in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

For some twelve years now I have had reading glasses. On going to the optometrist recently to get my eyes checked and a new prescription, it was discovered that there is something odd about the shape of the back of my left eye. So I have been going through a battery of tests at the hospital eye clinic to try to figure out what is going on. For each appointment I have had to have my eyes dilated, which means that I emerge from the clinic squinting against the outside light and finding everything looking quite blurry and peculiar.

When St Paul talks about the distinction between seeing a reflection as in a mirror as opposed to seeing face to face, he is using a metaphor that would be very meaningful to his Corinthian audience. Corinth was famous for the quality of its mirrors; but we need to remember that in the first century mirrors were made of polished metal which delivers a reflected image that is far from the crisp clear images we are used to from our modern glass mirrors. To see in a mirror is thus a far inferior experience to seeing face to face: one gains an impression, but it is a long way off experiencing the real thing.

We are a couple of weeks away from Valentine's Day. As the excellent article in our February edition of *The Messenger* points out, the commercialised romance of the modern celebration is poor reflection of the self-giving love of God, the kind of love exhibited to some extent in the life of either of the two men named Valentine once venerated in the calendar of the saints. But if the image is rather blurry and a bit out of shape, it nevertheless still signals that something true and real might be there.

We have something of the same phenomenon in relation to today's Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians 13. We know it so well, and we are so used to hearing it recited

at weddings. We tend to think of it as talking about love in that sense only, and overlook the fact that, really, Paul was talking about something else entirely. Nevertheless, this blurry reflection at its best still signals that something true and real is presented in what Paul writes.

It is instructive to place 1 Corinthians 13 in its context. It follows chapter 12 (which we have heard read over the last two weeks) in which Paul encourages the young Corinthian church to recognise the importance and value of all spiritual gifts. It is followed by chapter 14 in which Paul cautions the church to moderate the practice of speaking in tongues with the interpretation of tongues and with prophecy. It seems that the Corinthian church was deeply divided within itself over how to regard the gifts, and that some were thinking themselves superior to others on the basis that they possessed the gift of tongues.

Right in the middle of making points about these particular issues that were dividing the church, Paul sets out this great chapter on love. The message is that even in the midst of these differences of view and dissent over these issues, deeply important as they were to those involved, the church should pursue the way of love.

And if we imagine that the love of which Paul writes is only romantic love, then we really are seeing only a fuzzy misshapen reflection of the reality.

For the kind of love of which Paul speaks was so special that the New Testament writers had to press into use a Greek word that was hitherto rarely used – *agape*. And they used this word to express the kind of love that Jesus expressed in his life and death – love that gives itself for the sake of the other.

Paul urges the Corinthian church, arguing within itself, to focus rather less on the matters in dispute and to keep their eyes firmly fixed on pursuing this love exemplified in Jesus.

Paul starts by saying that even their most prized spiritual gift, if exercised in the absence of self-giving love, just becomes meaningless, potentially annoying or offensive, even abusive and manipulative.

He says that even if they had everything they derive status from, without love they are nobodies.

He says that they could do the most dramatic displays of giving or of enduring hardship even to the point of martyrdom, but if it is not motivated by love then they earn no credit for it.

Paul then goes on to describe some of the attributes of this self-giving love, this love that gives its all for the sake of the other.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

In Paul's description he uses, not adjectives, but *verbs*. Paul is talking about what expects members of the church to *do*. This is not Valentine's Day feelings and soppy sentimentality: this is *action*. And the form of verbs he uses are the ones that imply continuous action. *Love keeps on waiting patiently; love keeps on acting kindly*; and so on.

Some years ago I read (I forget where) the story of a young pastor newly appointed to a parish. On his first Sunday he preached on Christ's commandment to love one another. At the door at the conclusion of the service, various members of the congregation commended him on his excellent sermon and the gracious manner of its delivery. They were a little bemused however when he delivered the same sermon the following week. And the week after that there was quite a bit of fidgeting in the pews as the sermon was repeated again. People seemed to be avoiding making comment at the door. After a bit more of this, things came to a head when a delegation of elders came to him. They acknowledged that it was a very good sermon, but they wondered when he might prepare and deliver a different one. "When you start living this one," responded the pastor.

Love is expressed in *action*, in the things we *do* day after day.

These central verses of the chapter (verses 4-7) are well worth going over slowly, one concept at a time, in careful and prayerful reflection. Think about how each concept shows up in practice; think about what it would have looked like to practice that in Corinth in the midst of the division and conflict they faced. What would it have

looked like as a Corinthian to have been patient and long-suffering with someone who over and over again asserted their (in your view wrong) perspective on the matter of spiritual gifts, or on some other matter of church life important to you? What would it have looked like to be kind and thoughtful to another church member who kept on telling you that you weren't a proper Christian because you were on the wrong side of the issue; and what would it have looked like to be kind and thoughtful to one you thought had gone off the Christian rails? What would it have looked like if those who thought they had gifts of lesser value or no gift at all were not envious of those who did; and what would it look like if those who were regarded as having superior gifts kept themselves from parading them? What would it have looked like if members of the Corinthian church prone to being sensitive and easily angered had managed to keep calm? What would it have looked like if these people didn't keep on bringing up the failures of their fellow members, weaponising them against each other? And so on.

In your prayerful reflection take the time too to look at the ways you see each of these qualities in Jesus himself. Then ask yourself where you see each quality in yourself and where it is absent. And then it is worth reflecting on how you would behave, and what our church family would be like, if it was worked out in practice.¹

All the eye tests I'm having at present prompt at odd times the fleeting spectre that I might go on to suffer some deterioration in my sight. I've often thought over the years that sight is probably the sense that I most fear losing. But even more than fearing physical blindness, I fear *spiritual* blindness. As Paul writes about self-giving love in the compelling way he does, I'm sure about two things:

First, that he has a very clear vision for the kind of love that should be exhibited within the church because he is profoundly aware of his having experienced the self-giving love of Christ. Tuesday was the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, and we recall the utter transformation that occurred within him as a result of his encounter with the risen Lord. Paul is clear about having received the love of Christ, and he

¹Wright, *Paul*, p.174

does his utmost to extend that same kind of love to all.

But, second, I'm sure too that Paul has clear awareness of his own failures when it comes to living out this model of love. I know that I fail to love as fully and consistently and constantly as I want to, and I'm not a patch on Paul.

I love you, my brothers and sisters, but sometimes I fail you. Please help me to see where I can do better; and please forgive me, extending to me the love I try to put into action with you.

I pray that I always have the spiritual clear-sightedness to both know what Christ-like love in action is and to recognise when I've fallen short.

So as you take up my suggestion to reflect on these qualities of love in yourself and in the church, approach the exercise prayerfully, and with gentleness and grace towards yourself and others.

Approach it with grace, I say, *for now we see only a reflection as in a mirror....* You see, we need to be gentle and not overly judgemental with ourselves and one another in this because our life now is but a poor reflection of the quality of life that lies ahead when the kingdom of God is present in all its fullness.

But, while that is true, it doesn't let us off the hook. For a start Jesus modelled this love and commanded us to live it. But secondly, just as the poor reflection in the first century mirror still indicates that something true and real is there, so too our lives now are meant to foreshadow the life we will have when the kingdom of God is fully revealed among us. We live in a manner, we *do* self-giving love, that represents, as best we can, the quality of living and loving that characterises the kingdom of God.

Tom Wright puts it this way:

Love is the way of life in the new world to which, by grace, we are bound. We need to learn it here and now. ... The more progress we make in it here, the better we shall be equipped.²

We need to think within God's time-plan. The spiritual gifts are temporary aids and tools building up the church in the present age, between Christ's ascension and his

² Wright, *Paul*, p. 177

appearing among us again as King. We need these aids and tools in this age because we, the church, and the world we reach out to and serve, are but a dim and distorted picture of the perfection to come. The gifts won't be needed in the age to come, but *love* is something that will last into God's new world when Christ appears again.

The things that cause us to struggle to practice love for one another in our particular context and time might be different to those facing the Corinthian church, but the perspective remains the same. Everything needs to be evaluated in terms of what is important and of lasting significance.

And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Sources

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