

## Without love, I am nothing. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 30 March 2011.

The set text for this morning comes from the well-known passage in 1 Corinthians 13 concerning Christian love. The text itself consists in English of just eight words, 'if I have not love, I am nothing'. But, before I go any further, let me remind you of the opening three verses from which these words are taken ...

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

You may have noticed that, in stressing the necessity of love – which he does in these verses – the apostle Paul used the same expression, 'but have not love', three times.

In summary, he made it clear that : 'No matter what I **say**' (even if I master every human and angelic language) ... 'no matter what I **have**' (even the God-given gifts of prophecy, knowledge and miracle-working faith) ... 'no matter what I **do**' (even if I give away my *property to* others, and give my *body* in self-sacrifice **for** others) ... 'without love, what do I become?' – 'nothing' ... 'without love, what am I?' – 'nothing' ... and 'without love, what do I gain?' – 'nothing' ... in each case, absolutely nothing.

It is sobering to say the least to discover that I can have the most wonderful speech **in my mouth** ... have a complete understanding of God's mysteries and truth **in my mind** ... have tremendous resources of faith **in my heart** ... and have to my credit the most sacrificial of actions **in my conduct**, and that – because I don't love – I **achieve** nothing, I **am** nothing and I **benefit** nothing.

But what *is* this love which the Lord tells me is so indispensable?

Sometime ago I came across this (apparently genuine) definition of love offered by one young child, 'Love is when a girl puts on perfume, and a boy puts on after-shave, and they go out and smell each other'. No, that is *not* what the apostle Paul has in mind. And the love in view in our passage is far removed indeed from the erotic and sensual use of the word so common in the media and in society today.

In the verses which follow, the apostle does not set out to provide the Corinthians with a definition of love. What he does is to list for them – and us – some of the qualities and characteristics of Christian love ... in one sense, you could say, to paint love's portrait.

As I am sure you know, this past Sunday night was census time. I understand that a national census has been held every ten years since 1801. Yesterday, courtesy of my computer, I was reading through a census return which was submitted 160 years ago from Buckingham Palace. As it happens, the census night that year fell on 30<sup>th</sup> March – today's date. And every person residing at the Palace that night had to be included on the return – including the royal family, which then consisted of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and their children.

I noted that, under 'Name and Surname', the Queen is listed as 'her Majesty ALEX-ANDRINA Victoria', and that, although she was monarch of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, her husband, Prince Albert, is listed as 'Head' of the household, with the Queen shown simply as 'Wife'. Victoria was then 31 years old, having already reigned 13 years ... and with a further half a century before her. Indeed *our* Queen has still almost 4½ years to go to equal the length of her great, great grandmother's reign.<sup>1</sup>

Fifty years after that census, Lord Ronald Gower, a close friend of Queen Victoria, ventured to write to her, asking what was her favourite text from Holy Scripture. She wrote back to say, 'Love suffereth long and is kind'<sup>2</sup> ... which are, as you may know, the first two attributes of love listed by the apostle Paul in the remainder of our section today.

And I note that *these* two qualities of love in particular are God-like. For, in another of his letters (that to the Romans), Paul spoke of the riches both of His (God's) longsuffering and of His kindness<sup>3</sup> — on the one hand, withholding His anger (so richly *deserved* by us), and, on the other hand, exercising His kindness (so altogether *undeserved* by us).

Let me read the relevant verses to you.

**Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy** ... it doesn't, that is, resent the prosperity and success of others;

**love vaunts not itself** ... it doesn't, that is, parade itself; it doesn't blow its own trumpet, showing off to impress others,

**is not puffed up** ... the word so translated being derived from the Greek word for a bellows. Love, that is, isn't inflated with a sense of its own importance. It is no more guilty of inward pride than it is of outward show,

**does not behave rudely** ... love doesn't act, that is, in an unseemly or improper manner. It is marked by courtesy and tact, by consideration and respect for others,

**does not seek its own** ... love does not put itself first. It can be said of love, as it was of the Lord Jesus, that love looks not to its own interests but to the interests of others,<sup>4</sup>

**is not provoked** ... love doesn't get irritated and become bitter when it suffers injury at the hands of others,

**thinks no evil** ... here Paul uses a well-known accounting term. When love suffers wrong, love doesn't enter it in a ledger ... doesn't put it down against the account of the offender with a view to paying it back – perhaps with a high rate of interest – at the earliest opportunity. Love, that is, doesn't keep a note of wrongs done to it,

**does not rejoice in iniquity** ... love doesn't get any smug sense of satisfaction over the errors and wrong actions of others – love doesn't triumph and gloat over their falls, faults and failures,

**but rejoices in the truth** ... rejoices, that is, in all that is true,

**bears all things** ... love puts up with all things,

**believes all things** ... not that love is in any way gullible or naïve. But love is always keen to believe good of others ... always willing to give others the benefit of the doubt,

**hopes all things** ... even when hard facts prove beyond doubt that others are at fault, and it is therefore no longer possible to 'believe' the best of them, love will still 'hope' the best of them – that they will do better in the future.

**endures all things** ... even when love's hopes of others have been dashed and love has met with many sad disappointments, love doesn't give up. Love persists.

These then, Paul wanted the Corinthians, and wants us to know, are some of the qualities of love.

You cannot miss it. True love is not mere sentiment and feeling. While her car was in for MOT at Leckwith on Monday, Linda and I used our bus passes to go down to Barry Island. When we popped into a shop on the seafront to look around, I was impressed by the words on a fridge magnet I spotted there ... 'I like hugs and I like kisses, but what I need is help with the dishes'.

And, yes, true love will always express itself in action.

And Paul knew as well as any that the *supreme* expression of love is found in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. In one of the better-known texts in the New Testament, he wrote of, 'the Son of God who loved me, and gave Himself for me'. I said at the beginning that my text today consisted of just eight words, 'if I have not love, I am nothing'. Well, certainly without *that* love of Christ, I *should* be nothing.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Victoria was born 24 May 1819, came to the throne on 20 June 1837, and died on 22 January 1901. She reigned in all over 63 years (63y, 216d). Today Elizabeth = 59y, 52d (i.e. 4y, 164d to catch up). Today only 44 days catch up George III = 59y, 96d. See ... [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/museum/item.asp?item\\_id=35](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/museum/item.asp?item_id=35).

<sup>2</sup> Source : Henry Pickering, '1,000 Acts and facts', page 59.

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 2. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Phil. 2. 4.