

Disconnected thoughts about I Corinthians 13

January 28th 2007, St Marks' 10 am

I usually try to preach a sermon which has some kind of connected argument to it, but this week that hasn't proved possible for me. I have one of the best known and best loved passages of the New Testament to speak about - I Corinthians 13, so often heard at weddings, and sometimes at funerals, too. What I'm going to do is to share a number of rather disconnected thoughts about this wonderful passage - St Paul's Hymn to Love, it's sometimes called - scattering them rather like grapeshot, and hoping that one or two of these thoughts might find their target in one or two of you. You may like to keep your weekly sheet open in front of you, so that you can refresh your memories of the chapter.

Once I was given a greetings card, which I treasured for a long time, with Paul's wonderful words about love printed amidst a greenish design of flowers and butterflies - and I don't think it had come from a specifically Christian shop. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, I think you could buy that card in Trinity Street Post Office. Somehow, it seems, this passage has wide appeal. And that's the first thought I'd like to share - that there seems to be a vision here which many people respond to, whether believers, half-believers, or non-believers. Paul's portrait of love suggests human nature at its best. Something resonates within us: we want to be like that, although we know we're not - patient and kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude; not insisting on our own way; not irritable or resentful, not rejoicing in wrongdoing, but rejoicing in truth; bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things. Is this just attractive to us because we have been shaped in a culture which, itself, was shaped by the Christian vision? Or do we just want this pattern for our *closest* relationships because we value peace at home - but outside those closest relationships we can see quite a place for a bit of boastfulness, a bit of insisting on our own way, a bit of corporate enjoyment of other people's wrongdoings, when they're discovered and exposed for our titillation or self-righteous judgement?

There may be much in our culture which seems to suggest this double standard - but still, I believe that in people's attraction to Paul's words, there is something deep, which tells us that they recognise a universal value and claim in love at its best. That's to say, I think we can start from Paul's description of love, and suggest to our unbelieving or confused contemporaries that it paints a picture of the purpose of life - what human beings were made for. In the words of one of my favourite hymns, which

we sang at my licensing here: ‘we by love for love were made’. The Christian belief that God is Love, and God is our Creator and our End, chimes in with the deep attraction in many hearts to the kind of life-stance portrayed by Paul in I Corinthians 13. This popular passage, then, can be a starting-point for the kind of conversation which goes deep with people about what life is all about. A good beginning for sharing our faith, even though, (or perhaps because), neither God or Christ is explicitly mentioned in the chapter.

This leads me to remember someone – a reasonably elderly gentlemen in one of my last parishes – who was, in a sense converted by this passage. By which I mean that reading it, at a certain point in his life was that ‘penny-dropping moment’ when all he’d learnt of Christianity up to that point (and he was involved in a Christian introductory course) came together, and somehow the Spirit spoke to him in a new way. I think I’d suggested, as many people do, that you can read Paul’s description of Love in verses 4-7, and see them as a description of Christ. Or perhaps I’d suggested, (as many people also do) that you can take those verses, and substitute your own name for the word ‘Love’, and so discover just where the shoe doesn’t fit at all – where you begin to feel shifty – where you discover the need for grace and forgiveness in your own life : thus: ‘Maggie is patient...’ – well, I think not...’and kind’ : Always? Never ‘boastful, arrogant or rude,’ Oh dear! Well – you get the point...It’s an old method of self-examination, and a very searching one...

But, to get back to that elderly gentleman – Alan is his name, by the way – maybe I’d suggested such methods of reading the passage to him, maybe I hadn’t. But, really and truly, when he read the whole chapter through, at home, between our meetings, it was the Holy Spirit, I’m sure, who spoke to him – perhaps in ways that can’t be put into words. It’s just that when he talked about it the following week, there was a new light in his eyes...And it was a very happy and positive light, expressing , somehow, that he had been touched by the love of God himself. He went on with great joy to be confirmed. He may not be the most regular of churchgoers now – in fact, he definitely isn’t. But I know it still means a great deal to him, and his faith has been with him through some difficult and disappointing operations, and the onset of quite severe visual impairment.

Well, that’s not so much a thought about the passage – more a little testimony. But I think it’s worth sharing these things, sometimes.

Let’s take a more academic or systematic approach to the passage, now. Can we learn anything from where it sits in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians? If you were here last week, you will have heard Debbie read, very beautifully

the foregoing passage, from Chapter 12, about how we are, all together, the Body of Christ. You'll remember that it gets to be quite an involved passage – perhaps, one might even say, a bit laboured...A lot of stuff about how eyes can't tell hands that they don't need them...and so on, and so forth. I'm tempted to wonder whether Paul, in taking a break from composing this letter, didn't suddenly get a bit fed-up with the heavy weather he was making of all this 'different member' stuff. Perhaps he even began to wonder whether he might not lead his readers down some blind alleys: just imagine a church community which got hung-up on trying to work out who was the eye, and who the hand; who represented the ignoble bits of the body, which need greater honour shown them in compensation – and so on. In fact, as I heard Debbie read the passage last week, I slightly facetiously reflected that since clergy have, in so many traditions and in so many ways, expected particular kinds of honour to be paid to them, perhaps that's because we clergy are obviously the less honourable and less decent parts of the body of Christ, and quite evidently need special treatment....

But, enough of that! Doesn't that kind of interpretation, looking for one-to-one correspondence between symbols and persons, miss the point? Maybe that's what Paul was feeling when he launched off into his wonderful hymn to love: Let's get away from anything which could lead to nit-picking: Love is the real point. Living and ministering together with such consideration, self-forgetfulness, and self-restraint, that issues of inferior and superior, honourable and less-honourable gifts, just don't come into view.

Some commentators have suggested that Paul inserted his hymn to love into the letter after it was written. If you go back to the end of Chapter 12, he ends by exhorting Christians to seek the higher gifts. If you jump to the beginning of chapter 14, he immediately tells the Corinthians that prophecy is a higher gift than speaking in tongues. The two passages could flow neatly from one to the other. Could it be that it was later on that he thought – or perhaps someone even said to him – 'Hey, Paul? Isn't there something higher than any of these supernatural gifts you're writing about? Isn't love the most important thing of all, and the greatest hallmark of our Master?' And with that thought coming to him, he was smitten – smitten with the inspiration which gave us today's passage. That makes a certain kind of sense to me. And it intrigues me to wonder whether it was someone else who put that thought in his mind, and if so, who it might have been: Luke? Timothy or Titus (whose special day the church has celebrated this week)? Silas? Or Sosthenes, who was quite probably the secretary who actually wrote out the letter at dictation? Well – we shall never know; or not in this life, anyway. But there's a certain amount of inner dialogue in most of Paul's letters, and perhaps the Holy Spirit gives us our best inspirations through dialogue, whether it's totally within ourselves, or involves other people, too. Love in action, again.

But, so far, I've said relatively little about the actual content of this chapter. This could be because it's so well-known, and strikes home so easily without intervention, that I haven't felt the need to gloss the words. But may I just end by underlining how this passage is a passage about heaven, as well as daily life. It gives us that lovely and yet awe-inspiring hope, that one day we shall see God face to face, we shall know as we are known. Everything that is partial now – and even our best religious moments and insights are partial – will be set in the context of what is complete and whole. We shall have fully grown-up, at last. And not grown-up into unimaginative, jaded, competitive, anxious adults – as we sometimes grow-up in this life – but grown-up fully into the graciousness of faith, hope and love, as shown to us in the full-stature of Christ.

We're not fully grown-up now. But we're on our way. And this life is an education, whose chief purpose is that we should learn by attempt and failure, by trial and error, what love means. Because the fullness of love is our destiny - what we were made for.