

## 4th Sunday of the Year, Year C

Today's Second Reading is Paul's famous 'hymn to love'. It is a reading that we frequently hear, especially at weddings. I would like to take the opportunity to look at it more closely with you. As Paul speaks of love, he is thinking of Jesus. We would do well to do the same. Here is the reading re-translated (1Corinthiansn 12:31 - 13:13):

**Be ambitious for the higher gifts.**

**I will show you a way that is more excellent than any other.**

**I may have all the eloquence of human beings and of angels,  
but if I speak speak without love, I am a simply a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.**

**I may have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and know everything.**

**I may have such faith as to remove mountains,  
but if do not have love, I am nothing.**

**I may give away all my possessions, and even hand over my body to be burnt,  
but if do not have love, it will do me no good whatever.**

**Love never stops caring.**

**Love acts always in a kind way.**

**Love does not act out of jealousy or envy.**

**Love does not boast; or behave arrogantly.**

**Love does not behave indecently or insist on its own way.**

**Love does not give way to irritation; or brood over wrongs.**

**Love takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.**

**Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone  
love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes.**

**Love does not come to an end.**

**Prophecy will come to an end, as will languages and knowledge.**

**These are all imperfect. When perfection comes they will end.**

**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.**

**For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.**

**Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I am fully known.**

**Faith, hope, and love remain; and the greatest of these is love. Pursue love.**

Paul begins by stating that whatever extraordinary abilities we might be gifted with, without love they amount to nothing. He then goes on to describe central aspects of love. Most translations use adjectives: for example 'Love is patient; love is kind'. Paul, however, uses verbs: 'Love continues to care; love acts in a kind way'. He is not just describing certain qualities that pertain to love. He is telling us what love does.

The first two verbs, those that we have just mentioned, are traditionally associated with God. This is Paul's way of saying that the loving of which he is speaking is not any kind of loving. It is God's loving which is revealed in Jesus and which is poured into our hearts by Jesus' Spirit. It is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus pierced on the cross (John 19:34). This love is the gift of the Spirit, the fountain of living water that flows from Jesus' breast (John 7:38). It is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring of God that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus who, as Paul says elsewhere: 'is loving me and giving himself for me'(Galatians 2:20). It is shown by the kind

way in which we relate to others. As to kindness, Paul says elsewhere: 'Be *kind* to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you'(Ephesians 4:32). We see this long-suffering love and this kindness in the father in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.

Paul goes on to say what love is not. Again he uses verbs, because he wants to point to what love does not *do*. From contemplating Jesus, Paul came to see that love does not behave in a possessive way. We can be possessive by holding on to what we consider to be ours, not wanting others to share it. We can possess those we claim to love by not leaving them room to be themselves. This is jealousy, not love. Or we can see what others have and want it. This is envy, not love. Either way we are not free to hold lightly the gifts we have been given, and delight in the gifts that others have.

'Love does not boast', Paul tells us. 'Love does not behave arrogantly'. 'Love does not behave indecently'. In this context, the connotations of 'decent' are sexual (see also 7:36; 12:23). There is a modesty, a tenderness and a delicacy which is proper to love in its sexual expression (see 6:12-20).

'Love', says Paul, 'does not seek its own way, nor insist upon it. Love does not give way to irritation or brood over wrongs. Love takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth'. The truth, as always in Paul, refers to the ultimate reality of God as revealed in Christ on the cross. True love does not indulge in behaviour that is contrary to God's will (5:8), but only such as radiates the reality of God.

He goes on to say: 'Love bears all things'. The image is that of space. He is saying that love is about having space in one's heart, space for people, space to hold problems, disappointments and pain, as well as joys, hopes and dreams. Paul is thinking of the heart of God 'from whom are all things, and for whom we exist'(8:6). He is thinking of the heart of Christ 'through whom are all things and through whom we exist'(8:6). Our crucified Lord has space in his heart for all the members of the Corinthian community 'together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours'(1:2). He has space in his heart for the whole human race for which he offered his life (1:13; see also 9:2).

Paul concludes his reflections on love by saying: 'Love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things'.

'Love believes all things'. Love and faith are intimately connected. To believe is to be open to God's self-revelation, to accept what we come to know when we listen to God, and to act accordingly. God knows every one and every thing with the knowledge of one who loves. In other words, God continually believes in us and in our possibilities for good. God respects our freedom, but he cares passionately for us and draws us to him and to each other through the people and the events of our life. To this end God offers us the possibility of repentance when we fail, and believes in our capacity to be converted. For us, too, believing and loving are inseparable.

Love 'hopes all things'. There is a close link, too, between hope and love. One who loves is attentive to present communion with the one loved. But the present moment is not static or isolated; rather, it points to and opens up a future communion for which we long, and to which

we are called. Our present union encourages us to leave the future confidently in the hands of him in whom we have placed our trust.

Love 'endures all things'. Paul is speaking of the ability to remain faithful to love in the midst of opposition. The supreme example of this is Jesus on the cross.

And Paul's conclusion! 'Love never comes to an end'. Love is what God is. We who are made in the image and likeness of God share in God's being. Love, then, is not something which we have. It is essentially what we are. This is why we seek to give and receive love. We seek to be in communion with the universe, because our hearts are made to be in communion with God, and remain restless till this communion is complete.

Paul's plea, and the Church's plea to us through this reading, is that we not waste our lives in make-believe love, but that we open our hearts to Jesus' Spirit and allow his love to purify us so that the love we receive and the love we give will, indeed, bring us into true communion. Only in this way will we know the peace for which we long. Only in this way can we carry out the command of Jesus to love one another as he loves us.