

Reflection on the Fifth Sunday after Easter

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Introduction prior to the Bible reading:

I want to set the context for the Bible reading a little. If you were with us last week you may recall that we read part of the first chapter of 1 Corinthians – the letter that Paul had written to the church in Corinth. In that first chapter, we heard that even though they had many blessings, there were some divisions in the church. Some were saying “I belong to Apollos” (one of the other preachers), others saying they belonged to Cephas; a few had been baptised by Paul and aligned with him, and so on, and there were some small jealousies and rivalries. Although actually, there are some deeper jealousies going on too.

It turns out that the church in Corinth is pretty charismatic. There were people with various spiritual gifts that were being well expressed, everything from speaking in tongues to words of wisdom and knowledge, healings even – the whole box and dice. Leading up to today’s passage Paul talks about how different people have different gifts, and all are members of the body of Christ in the different ways that God calls them to be. He also talks about how this means that various people take on various roles: apostles, prophets, teachers, those doing deeds of power and healing; those who assist, provide leadership and so on.

Which is all great. But there’s some disquiet because we’re all human, and so prone to jealousies and resentments and pride. Hence the way this passage begins, and how it concludes; but the centre, as we’ll hear, is love....

Read: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I asked you to come up with some Bible passages that talk about love, I wonder what passages would spring to you mind. I reckon they might include:

Jesus says: this is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.

Jesus names the two principle commandments as loving God, and loving our neighbour as ourselves.

God acts for the world by sending Jesus because God so loved the world.

The letter of John comments that God is love, and that those who live in love live in God, and God in them.

And this is love, that God first loved us.

And Paul, in his letters, talks about how it is love that fulfils the Torah, the Jewish law.

Of course, sometimes we might not FEEL particularly loving. But regardless of feeling, Paul’s interest is in how love is expressed: our actions and attitudes towards others reflecting how Jesus befriends us and lays down his life for us.

At the moment, we are laying down so much of our normal lives as we seek to protect each other and the community as a whole.

Love is being tested, as for some people this is an experience of a long time in close quarters with personalities that usually have more space; for others this is an experience of a long time *without* the close or normal contacts with people that we love.

It's not easy to be patient and kind, and bear all of this, and hope through all of this, and believe through all of this. It may be relatively easy to be envious or irritable or arrogant. Gritting our teeth and being nice might get us some of the way, but more significantly we need to feel grounded in God's love to be the best people God makes us to be.

We each have different primary ways of expressing and receiving love, some of which may be more challenged than others in these times, adding to the depths of this experience. Some of you might have come across Gary Chapman's books on what he calls "The Five Love Languages", in which he argues that each of us *primarily* express love in one of five ways, and that we most recognise love when it comes to us in that way.

The five languages he suggests are Words of affirmation; Acts of service; Gifts; Physical touch; and Quality time.

So, for example, some of us couldn't care less about what someone might say to us, but we're deeply moved by someone's helpful support; and others of us are not fussed about whether their friend spends much time with them, but deeply value the words they say or write.

Around the congregation it isn't hard to think of people who express friendship through walking together with other people – quality time; cooking a meal for them – gifts; helping in someone's garden – acts of service; making phone calls, or personal contact... all of these good and different expressions of love and care.

Being forced to do things differently at this time means that we might notice things about how we give and receive love, and how that is frustrated, in these circumstances. We might think about how those languages relate to the ways that we experience God's love, and the ways we seek to express it.

So, for people whom Words of Affirmation is a primary language, for whom verbal expressions of care and affection are really valuable, I wonder if there is a link with hearing the gospel word of God's love, and seeking to share that word with others, affirming God's love and valuing of them. I wonder if these people are the best to be making phone calls to others.

For people for whom Acts of Service are primary, I wonder if Jesus' action for others – and for you - is especially inspiring, and helps to drive a desire to show love for others through

acts of service and justice. Have you already been offering to help your neighbours if you are able; and feeling frustrated if you can't?

For people for whom Gifts are the primary love language, who like to put effort into giving good gifts to people, I wonder if in relation to God you can appreciate God's gifts by the Spirit, and use your gifting for the sake of building up the church?

If your primary language is Physical Touch, and for you hugging, or holding hands, or touch generally is so vital, there is always special discipline required but never more so than now. I wonder if the physicality of connection to the earth, and in tangibility of the elements of communion, might provide a focus for your reflection on God's love?

And if your primary language is Quality Time, such that you value doing things, or spending time with another; can the presence that you offer for others also be reflected in time alone with God?

I offer these thoughts as things that you might notice or wonder about in yourself and in how you relate with God and with others. I offer these thoughts because there are different ways in which we share and experience love.

At the moment, we have varied levels of satisfaction or frustration that relate to how easily we're able to express ourselves and know ourselves loved; so it's worth pointing out the various ways in which God's love reaches out for us to experience, through all that God says, does, gives, offers, and in God's abiding presence.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about love precisely because they have differing gifts and ways of expressing them; but the foundation of Christian community is love. More than that, the foundation of God's action for us is love, and the foundation our identity is that God loves us, as God's own children.

All of our other gifts and jealousies will pass, but faith, hope and love abide; and the greatest of these is love.