

SERMON

1Corinthians 12:31b-13:7

Actually Loving

Nunawading and Waverley, 30-1-22

Dear friends in Christ,

I have a great concern about the growing hatred between people with different political views. There will always be differences but it is much better to engage in a respectful and civil discourse rather than a hateful one that polarises the debate and drives people to take up even more extreme positions than they would have if they simply listened. What happens in the culture can creep into the church. So, we need to be careful.

Sometimes, a break from what is happening can be useful. Watching young families in the parks, people enjoying themselves in a restaurant or at the beach does make you realise that there are many people, maybe a majority who do want community, togetherness, friendship and love. I notice this amongst my neighbours. By nature, people do want to come together and as I have said, this is the first step of mission.

Let us then guard what the Holy Spirit has created amongst his people, this oasis of love called the church. Paul calls love **the highest way of all**. Love is not an alternative to spiritual gifts but provides us with the way they should be used. We have ideas about the congregation, we have spiritual knowledge, we have gifts of administration, teaching, evangelism, healing and helping and Paul is saying, "Let's use these gifts in a loving, humble and Christ-like manner.

He provides us with a healthy warning. Let's say, you could do something exceptional. You are a great writer of Christian music or you are a student of theology and you want people to listen to you and learn from you. We are warned to act in love or else we become hollow: **If I speak in the languages of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a**

clanging cymbal. What does he mean by **I am nothing** without love? Clearly, Christian music and theology are good things in the church. However, the Lord looks at our hearts, our attitudes and motivations. Without love, self-love takes its place and that makes us nothing. Christ is in our hearts and he wants to change us and to move us to think of the overlooked people of the church.

Paul speaks of how love behaves: **Love is patient, love is kind.** The Holy Spirit is at work in us to help us to be **patient** with difficult people, to show forbearance. We are willing to good to others even if we do not like them. Then, he says what love will not do: **It does not envy; love does not boast; it does not puff up. It does not behave disgracefully, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. It does not delight in injustice.** Love does not seek recognition and the admiration of others, which are born out of **envy**, competition, wanting to be someone. Paul is thinking of loveless behaviour that puts people down and causes shame. This is a special feature of our age. **It is not self-seeking** reminds us of Paul's injunctions to not seek one's own interests but consider others above yourself. Quick-temperedness and over sensitivity can lead to sudden flare-ups. The Christian is exhorted to not settle scores or keep a mental list of infringements. Love rules out unfair treatment of others or unethical deals because you are not seeking your own advantage but are wanting to bless others.

Finally, the apostle returns to what actions love will engage in: **It bears all things, trusts all things, hopes for all things, perseveres in all things.** Behind these statements about faith, hope and love is the Lord's continuing work in the Christian community. His presence in the lives of us all helps us to stop reacting to everything. Given time, people can respond to the word and change. Putting the best construction on another's actions and assuming that people are working from good motives help us to bear up under all things, to trust, to persevere and hope. The best can emerge from others as the Spirit is at work within us.

Love, this sacrificial, humble, gracious, gentle and forgiving love is the easiest thing to talk about but the hardest thing to do. People can criticise and find fault. They can dominate and want their way. They say foolish things and have opinions that can be offensive. This is when our love is sorely tested and we need to fall back on our Saviour, Jesus Christ. He loved his enemies. God gave his Son to the world while it was in an enemy state. Jesus loves and justifies us when we fall short of what he requires of us. So, we return to Christ over and over again to renew our love.