

Love! While it's only explicitly mentioned at the start of our first reading, it's actually related to a good chunk of both our readings are about.

Let's start with our first reading. One can't read Paul talking about love without thinking of his passage in 1 Corinthians famously dealing with it. And in fact there are many parallels between that passage and our reading. "Hate what is evil, cling to what is good" he says in Romans, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" in Corinthians. "Love is patient ... it always hopes, always perseveres" we read in Corinthians while Romans says "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer".

However, the big difference between Corinthians and Romans is the focus. In Corinthians, you could see Paul focused on the "Theory" behind love, he is expressing love in terms of other emotions and feelings. In Romans, he is much more focused on the practical actions that Love will result in. Instead of "it is not easily angered" which we have in Corinthians, in Romans he fleshes it out into "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ... Live in harmony with one another".

So in Corinthians we have a list of attributes that help us to describe love while in Romans we have a set of guidelines into the actions we need to be aiming for in order to show our love. We are given guidance about *how* to show love to those around us, and Paul says that it needs to be to *all* those around us.

But you might be thinking "Why should I? My neighbour that has loud parties that go on into the early hours of the morning every weekend, so that surely means I don't have to include them in the people I show love to."

Sorry, Paul has that covered as well, quoting from Proverbs (25:21-22). "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." We are not allowed to pick and choose who we include in our displays of love.

It's not easy but Paul gives us 2 reasons to act this way. The first continues the quote from Proverbs, "in doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head". Isn't it great when we can make our enemies feel bad!

He then follows up with "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Paul recognises that if we allow ourselves to exclude others from those we show love to, even if they have given us every reason to do so, that it will start to affect us. We might start out excluding those that really deserve it, but gradually, that circle of exclusion will grow as we exclude more and more. We will start excluding those that annoy us, then those that are linked with those that annoy us. Before we know it, we can justify excluding anyone.

From other sermons, you may be aware that I enjoy reading Harry Potter fan fiction, stories written by fans of the original stories that are set in the world of Harry Potter. One of the ideas that comes up in some of the stories is that the curses powered by hatred affect the person casting them, making them darker, more prone to hatred and less able to love. I think that's sort of what Paul is getting at here. If we allow hatred, or not loving, into our lives, it will grow and try to overcome us. If we focus on what is good, on love, then we can overcome it.

It's not natural to us, we need to work at it, we need, as we have just sung, quoting Psalm 51, God's help to clean our hearts. That's what we do in our confession, we admit our sins to God, those things that have made our hearts darker and dirtier, and we allow God to wash us and give us clean hearts, hearts that are open to love.

Going back to the question I suggested we may be thinking earlier of “Why should we make the effort to love everyone?” we get a bit more of an answer when we look at our Gospel reading.

This is a two part answer with the first part being the example Jesus sets us. Jesus is nearing the end of his time with the disciples and he's trying to get them to understand what is going to be coming up. He knows that he is going to be arrested, tortured and then suffer a most painful death. But he is still focusing on his disciples and helping them understand.

Even when Peter, ever the impulsive man, tries to dissuade Jesus from his path, he doesn't reject Peter. He does reject the temptation to avoid the pain and suffering that Peter is being used to put in front of him, but he never rejects Peter. We see this after Jesus' resurrection when he draws Peter back into a loving relationship again.

In doing this he is demonstrating the love that he wants to see in each of us. It's a love that puts the other first. A love that doesn't look for fuzzy feelings or self gratification, but that persists even when things are not easy.

Then he follows this demonstration of Love up with the declaration “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Living in a Roman controlled land, the disciples would have known what carrying their cross meant. It was the last thing a prisoner condemned to crucifixion did, to carry their cross from the prison to the place where they were going to be crucified.

Jesus is saying that his disciples were going to have to be prepared to go through the same things Jesus himself did. Living in Yorkshire in 2020, we don't have to worry too much about being physically crucified, but we do still have burdens that we have to bear. Jesus, through suffering and dying before being raised back to life, has shown us that through love, the force that carried him and supported him, we can endure and overcome whatever will come our way.

Finally I would like to say that we are called to show *God's* love to those around us. It's not something that we have to manufacture, it is something that we are supplied with and need to share.

If you think of it as trying to water a garden, we are not expected to be clouds, generating rain to provide the water. We are more like a sprinkler, we take the flow of water from the hose and spread it out allowing it to water large areas.

So we are called to share God's love with those around us. We have been given guidance so that we know what showing love will involve, what it will look like. So let's get out there, in a socially safe way obviously, and get on with it.

Amen.