

“The greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13.13)

This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, but is also, of course, Valentine’s Day. If I were to ask you, “what is love?”, what might your answer be? I’m sure the quick-witted among you might respond with the Europop song lyrics from Haddaway, “Baby don’t hurt me...”. Some others might explain it with something to do about chocolate and roses. What about a one-word answer, can you think of another word that encapsulates *all* that love is? In its deepest and truest sense, I can only think of one word that really does: God.

The First Epistle of St. John tells us this much: “God is love” (1 John 4.8 & 16). God is the root of love, or in philosophical terms, the “supreme good”. All good flows *from* him, and He is ultimately at the end of everything else we seek. He is the only thing that ever really fulfills our desires, for everything else satiates us for only a moment but then we are impatient again. St. Augustine of Hippo, understanding this, famously wrote in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

Our hearts truly are restless until we rest in God. This is *part* of the point St. Paul tries to make in our Epistle. Love, especially when it is properly understood to flow out of a love from God, informs all else and makes all else important, he says. Our love *for* God and feeling love *from* God enables us to use the gifts he has given us to his glory. It is love from God that gives us faith and hope, and therefore it is superior to them.

The language we have in the *Book of Common Prayer* is that of the King James Version, and I believe it makes a very important distinction. In this King James Version, the more precise word *charity* is used. We get this word from the Latin, *caritas*, which itself is a translation of the original Greek, *agapē* – a word I’m sure many of you have heard before. Agape, caritas, charity, is a very precise love that finds its source in God. It is love that is unconditional and stretches past all our human limitations. In his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis defines four types of love found in Christian Scripture and theology: *Storge* (empathy), *Philia* (friendship), *Eros* (romantic), and *Agape* (God-love). While each of these are gifts of God, one in particular defines the surpassing love of God which was born in the flesh and crucified, and that is Agape. A grace-filled love that has no limits, and far exceeds our expectations. Our experience of it defines our ability to share it. Our experience of it naturally flows in our relationship with each other. It is a love that causes us to love God and love one another.

“To Augustine, your love is what your behaviour shows to be of the highest importance to you. If a person loves God, he or she finds true liberty and wholeness. If a person loves creatures without reference to the Creator, he or she loses insight and understanding.” American theologian Jamie Smith has a whole book based on this exact idea: *You Are What You Love* is its title. So where do we place our God-given love? Do we follow God’s commandment to love him and love our neighbours as ourselves? St. Paul might argue that it certainly should. We should latch to this Agape love because it is the only thing that will *really* last.

This Epistle is famously read at weddings, where you can’t help but interpret it as a personification of the love between the bride and groom. It speaks, of course, to the nature of the wedding vows and how this virtue of love is greater than all other bonds the couple may experience. However, many modern people hear this and undoubtedly receive it at surface value only. This idea of a vague force-field of “love” that floats all around us is hollow without God at the centre. The love talked about by St. Paul is necessarily focused on God as its source and inspiration, and so takes on a much broader meaning than just the love between two people – though, I emphasize, this is important too.

The love of God, according to St. Paul, is what sets apart a Christian. The Christian, by knowing the love of God through Jesus Christ, is *able* to embody this “difference factor”. If we are what we love, then if we love God, we can be *of* God – his own children. And by being *of* God, his love will shine through our words and deeds. Without love, charity, Paul says, we are nothing. Because love makes us more. It does not envy or boast, it is not arrogant or rude, it is not irritable or resentful. Instead, it is patient, kind, rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor. 13.4-7). Doesn’t that sound so much better than being simply “of the world”? For the love of God empowers us to be *better* than we otherwise might be. And it enables us to have faith and hope: for what is faith or hope without the love of God?

St. Paul says all this to the Corinthians to encourage them to use the gifts that God has given them for the benefit of all, not to boast and be envious of each other’s gifts. This resonates as much with us now as it might have for the Corinthians. In a world where our attention is drawn left, right, up, and down, focus on God. In a world overrun by Sin and death, focus on the life God breathes. In a world rampant with injustices, show the love you know to others. *Be the light in the darkness.*

It is precisely for this reason that the word, charity, has become synonymous with almsgiving, outreach, and assistance. It is done from a place of love: where the love we share with God manifests as love for our neighbours. While the overtly Christian nature of many charitable organizations has faded, we must understand the root of the word: love. A charity is an organization that shows love to others, plain and simple. So, while the word simply signifies a social service now, own it and recognize that it comes from God, for He is the source of all that is good.

So, what is love? Love is God.

This lesson and today’s collect serve as a critical reminder for us about what is the most important: the virtue of Love. And it does this to prepare us for what is shortly coming: Lent is a season that before all else is meant to remind us about God’s love for his world. For the crucifixion, unbeknownst to Jesus’ disciples (Luke 18.31-34), is not an utter failure but is instead a supreme act of love to save the whole of creation from the destruction of sin and death. We will be reminded over and over again that the whole narrative of the life of Jesus is rooted in this love: from his birth and Incarnation in Bethlehem to his Resurrection.

Because he lived and died, we have the hope of eternal life. Because he went around healing all manner of sickness and adversity, we have faith that he has the power to control all of creation. And because he first loved us, we have learned how we can love him and each other.

Charity, the love of God, should be at the heart of all that we do as the Church. As St. Augustine wrote in a homily, we do not know which others will be with God. We don’t know how God has foreknown them. The people who are not yet members of his Church may be hidden neighbours of ours, but they are known to God. “Consequently, let us who do not know the future accept each and every person as a neighbour.”¹ Let us show the love of God to everyone we meet. And to do this, to be better equipped for it, let us first know God’s love ourselves so that we might be ready when the hard task of spiritual warfare is upon us.

Now, as we lie on the doorstep of Lent – fifty days to Easter – we recall all that we have learned since Christmas. Who Jesus is, and how he was shown to the world. Now we know him as love in the flesh – God in the flesh. May this knowledge be with us for our journey to Calvary’s hill.

¹ St. Augustine, *Second Homily on Psalm 25*, 2