

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

Loving More

‘The greatest of these is love’ so St Paul concludes the most famous passage in his writings – perhaps the most famous passage in the New Testament. Faith and hope matter, they ‘abide’, but it is love that is the greatest thing.

We take this prioritizing of love for granted, and perhaps even find it something of an awkwardness, not least when we find ourselves facing a human situation that doesn't seem to invite a loving response – a situation that requires discipline or punishment, correction or rebuke. And yet love could hardly be love if it were only the soft and romantic stuff. There is a difference between being loving and being nice. If happily married couples don't appreciate this in the early months of their relationship, the birth of a child or two soon makes the point. I've never held with the cliché that you have to be cruel to be kind, but I do believe that you sometimes have to do or say things that someone doesn't want to hear if you are to be genuinely loving. The easy and, paradoxically, selfish thing is often to say what people want to hear, or to give them what they want rather than what they need. But that's just a way of spoiling people. ‘Spoiling’ may be an old-fashioned idea but it's a correct one. If we love people we want them to be happy not only now but in the future; in fact we will care more about the future than we do about the present moment because we know that the future holds very, very many present moments. And so a loving teacher will give a fair, not flattering, assessment of a piece of work before pointing out what needs to happen if things are to improve. A loving parent will spot the development of bad habits

or behaviours that, while charming in a toddler, will be repellant in a teenager, or which if indulged in a schoolchild might make them an arrogant but extremely lonely undergraduate.

Love need not always be tough – but it must always have the possibility of being tough because loving someone means committing yourself to caring for the other person, and being at the service of their best interests. Of course there may be some debate about what those best interests are. And that brings us to the art, skill and craft of loving. Love is absolutely not about dominating or seeking to over-determine someone else's life. The patience in love, of which Paul writes so beautifully, is not the impatient form of patience that waits for the other to fit into my way of seeing things while I drum my fingers. Rather it is the patient kind of patience which is open to the awkward but beautiful and vital otherness of the beloved.

It is often said that you can only love people, you can't love objects. This ought to be true, but many people do have a kind of love relationship with material things, while others have a love relationship with their own ideas or hopes or plans. This is not true love but a corrupt form of love. True love is always with and of a person, and it combines affection with desire for companionship, pleasure in passing time together, and the rigorous business of sustaining a relationship over time. Sometimes loving relationships involve exceptional and delicate intimacy. It is such relationships, 'sexual' is the word I am skirting around, that attract a disproportionate amount of attention in literature, cinema and in the anguished debates of the church. No sermon on love can fail to point to the Christian understanding that such relationships have

the potential to be consummated in a communion so profound that it is as close as the relationship between Christ and the church; which is close as saying ‘this is my body, this is my blood’. But neither can any sermon on love allow itself to get quite as excitedly distracted about the importance of policing such relationships, or the anxious process of creating boundaries that define the possibility of who may have intimacy with whom, as the church has allowed itself to become.

Our Chaplain often makes the point that it’s the quality of love that matters not the gender of the lover and I want to make the complementary point that it’s not the focus, but the range and breadth and comprehensiveness of love that matters. To make this point I have to invite you to move your mind and hearts and imagination away from the endlessly fascinating arguments around sexuality and to focus them instead on the extraordinary Christian commandments to love your neighbour as yourself and to love your enemy. These are huge commandments – commandments that we can be never sure we have kept or will keep fully.

One of the tests of intimate relationships is not how good they are, or how rewarding to the partners, but how generative they are. That is, how much they help and enable those involved to respond to the great commandments to love God, neighbour and enemy. If a married couple live faithfully together for decades and decades, but over time become more and more crabbed and bitter, niggardly and mean, then I am not sure that there is much to praise about their relationship. If, on the other hand, people live, let us say, more wayward lives, and yet find that they grow in good-will, generosity, charity, appreciation of others and capacity to forgive,

and that they develop a wide-ranging affection, then who am I to be their judge.

Let me conclude by referring to Toni Morrison's wonderful novel *Song of Solomon*, which set among struggling black communities in the United States. The most impressive character in the book is a woman called Pilate. An unusual name, but in this novel all the women in a certain family were given their names when, shortly after their birth, their father opened the bible at random and chose the first name he saw – so one is called First Corinthians, another Magdalen, so on. Pilate herself goes through many trials and knows many kinds of suffering; she experiences extreme emotions and resorts, on one occasion, to significant violence, bashing a young man over the head with a bottle because she held him responsible for her daughter's suicide. It is indeed a tough book about troubled people, but Pilate is ultimately a hugely loving figure. Towards the end of the novel Pilate says this 'I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would have loved em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more.' (p418)

Love is a Christian virtue and it stands at the heart of Christian life. It is so central that I would venture to say that if you want to know whether or not you are a good Christian ask yourself this: am I always learning how to love better? And, am I finding that as time goes by I love more and more people? Love is good. More love is better.

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1 Corinthians 13; Luke 18.31-end
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