

Quinquagesima Sunday, 11th February 2018

A sermon preached at King's College Chapel, Cambridge by the Revd Canon Rosalind Brown, Durham Cathedral.

1 Corinthians 13, Luke 18.31-43

We heard the apostle Paul writing very well-known words to a new and rather chaotic church in the cosmopolitan port city of first century Corinth. Usually when I preach on this text it is at a wedding when the focus is on the joy of romantic love, so it can be a bit of a shock to realise that, in its context, Paul is more concerned with tough love that is given and received in the context of division, even conflict. That reframes things and to understand it, we have to understand who Paul was writing to.

The Corinthian church was five or six years old when this letter was written, probably around 55 AD; so think back to 2012 and imagine the church did not exist then. They were new and rather muddled at understanding the impact of the gospel. Paul had lived in Corinth for about 18 months, establishing the church despite strong opposition from local Jews who felt threatened by his teaching. He left and continued his missionary travels but a few years later heard that the church was divided and quarrelling, with a serious case of immorality and lots of confusion over a range of questions. They were also being litigious when they fell out, taking one another to secular courts to secure their rights. It was not a happy picture. Paul attempted to sort things out in this letter which followed a previous, now lost, very stiff letter in which he was obviously very firm with them.

We know from the names of people mentioned in the letter that the church was a mix of Jewish and Gentile people and, in addition to the religious tensions, the great extremes of social background caused

conflicts between wealthy people and others who were poorer or, in some cases, slaves. So, for example, we know the city treasurer was a Christian and another person had a house big enough to be used as the church's meeting place. But others were slaves or scraped a living: Paul had lived with Aquila and Priscilla who, like him, were tent makers working in one of the numerous small shops, and he refers to his lack of social status which meant some of his opponents despised him. We know that some people in the church found him an embarrassment because of his unimpressive speech and appearance.

At the start of the letter, before weighing into specific difficult issues, Paul described Jesus Christ, who had endured the ultimate shame and humiliation of crucifixion, as the power and wisdom of God. In the gospel reading we heard Jesus anticipating this humiliating treatment and that governs Paul's theological perspective: if we serve Jesus Christ who was humiliated like this, no one is to be treated in the way that some members of the Corinthian church were treating others of lower social status.

When the early church gathered to break bread and share communion, as we do today, they did so in the context of a shared meal. Earlier, Paul had criticised the church for the way they handled this because the rich members who did not have to work for their living were arriving early and eating all the food, leaving nothing for people arriving after a full day's work who had to worship on empty stomachs. Paul was furious with the church for not showing mutual love or living as Christians whose lives have been transformed. He told people to eat before they left home if they were so hungry they couldn't wait for others, because otherwise they would be judged by God for failing to recognise they were all one body in Christ. He also told them off for their handling of the various gifts God had given them which were not to be boasted about, just used for the common good. Being able to speak in tongues, have insight and knowledge,

or be seen to be generous donors, are good gifts from God but still just a load of noise if used without love. And in that light, of trying to get them to respect and value each other, he wrote the words we heard about love, or charity which is not just romantic but expressed in kindness, patience, gentleness and lack of irritability, without the envy, arrogance and rudeness that shamed the Corinthian church.

Paul's words could equally have been directed to the people around Jesus who told the poor blind beggar to shut up when he shouted to Jesus for help. To their surprise, Jesus stopped, asked him what he wanted and then healed him. He promptly joined the group around Jesus which probably startled, perhaps embarrassed, them. God's love ignores social status.

I am a visitor here so I don't know what it is like at Kings College; or in other churches represented here today; only you know if you recognise your community in this picture, just as I have to ask myself about how Paul's words apply at Durham Cathedral. We prayed in the Collect for the most excellent gift of charity, of love, which is the bond of peace and all virtues. God will answer that prayer if we are open to receiving the answer, perhaps by finding that we become more aware of some of our attitudes and actions that need to be amended, so that love can take root. How is the Kings College Chapel community living a life that embodies God's love which has reconciled you, just as God's love brought together the Corinthians despite their different social and religious backgrounds?

This reading is very appropriate at weddings where people are making their commitment to each other, but we miss the point if we consign it to being purely about romantic love. Love is proved in the tough times, when people irritate or anger us, or are just so different from us that we look down on them in some way. So this reading is demanding, but also very encouraging because Paul knew that with

God's help and God's love, it is possible to love in a way that overcomes what society thinks of as natural barriers.

So, Sunday by Sunday as we gather to share bread and wine as the Corinthians did, we too are challenged whether our daily life truly expresses the reconciling love of God that we have experienced for ourselves. Otherwise it does not make sense to gather as one body around one table. If you have any doubts about how you match up to this, as you come to receive the bread and wine ask God to pour into your heart that most excellent gift of love. We are about to begin another Lent and, instead of giving something up for Lent, why not ask God each morning to reveal his love to and through you during the day. Then see what God does in your life in the coming weeks.