

The New Testament reading is spot-on by connecting the great poem of love in chapter 13 with the gifts of chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians.

If we leave out these verses of chapter 12, we will have no clue as to the context of chapter 13. In fact most people, including some Christians, vaguely know it is mainly on love since it is often being read at weddings. 1 Corinthians 13 isn't a detached poem of love. Without chapter 13, chapters 12 and 14 will be disjointed. In chapter 12 Paul has dealt with individual gifts, but these individual gifts are to be used not privately but corporately for the building up of the body of Christ. The individual gifts are meant to remind them they are the body of Christ.

Yet over against the 'varieties of gifts, varieties of ministries, varieties of expressions', there is the unity of God: Father, Son and Spirit, whose work underlies all these differences, and there is the unity of the confession: 'Jesus is Lord' which marks the authentic presence of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12.3-6).

In other words, there must be a unifying factor in virtue which is the expression of the church's one faith.

Paul begins this poem of love by mentioning certain spiritual gifts: speaking in human languages and angelic languages, prophecy and special knowledge of hidden truth, special faith such as to move the mountains.

Is Paul saying these spiritual gifts are useless, meaningless? NO! He is saying the achievements of these spiritual gifts are meaningless without love.

Does it sound odd to you? Are they not spiritual gifts? If so how come it will not have effect even though it may not be done in love?

These are individual gifts, vocations, particular callings to which one is summoned individually, which will distinguish this man's service from his neighbour's, and will mark his history out as a unique and personal history. It is not that Paul deprecates the individual and personal distinction; it is not that he suspects all striking manifestations of it of a secret hypocrisy.

Paul's point is simply that a life considered solely as the fulfilling of a personal destiny, the working-out of an individual charisma, is a vacant abstraction. The particularity of vocation must serve as a window through which the universal character of all Christian life may appear. Just as the variety of voices within the church are unified in a common confession, 'Jesus is Lord', so the variety of forms of life are unified within a common form of life according to God's order, the life of love.

Imagine someone taking one of Jesus' commands to its literal extreme by giving away all one's possessions (Mark 10.21), perhaps in order to feed the poor. Paul then imagines himself handing over his body, perhaps to be tortured or to death, in order to be able, like the martyrs of the old, to feel that he really had something to boast of. But even accomplishments like these, in the absence of love, Paul says, 'won't do me any good at all.'

Why is it no good at all?

Paul clearly imagines that on the last day those who have been justified by faith in the present will be judged according to the life they have lived (See 3.10-15); and the one thing that will count above all else on that day is not faith but love.

Vs. 4-7 in chapter 13, are no longer dealing with vocations and gifts, but with moral character. Martyrdom may be the calling of a select few, but freedom from envy is a demand upon all. The unity which can be seen behind the many forms of individual goodness is nothing other than the fulfillment of the moral law. That is what makes these differences of character good: they are true interpretations, each within a unique vocational matrix, of the one moral life, the life which is given to all people to live.

Can we achieve all these characters all the time? Or one, or two, or even three at a time? If on the cross Jesus has revealed his true love to all human beings, then we say Jesus has actually fulfilled what Paul said in vs. 4-7. The word Love and Jesus are interchangeable in these verses. On the other hand, as already mentioned, this is the one moral life given by God and He demands us to live. How far have we achieved or failed to achieve? We may

be asking God what kind of vocation we are meant to pursue in life, but we cannot say God hasn't given us a moral life.

At this point, it is interesting to deal with a related issue. First let us settle a preliminary issue. I don't think we need to question if Paul actually wrote this poem. However, if he wrote it, certain issues arise. Some people find Paul to be a very difficult person to have around – he seems to be unpleasant, awkward, and argumentative. We wouldn't want to have him as our new Rector! If that is the case, one wonders why he could have written such a beautiful poem of love.

Furthermore, 1 Corinthians is a very personal letter. If Paul had not been a loving person, and, since he knew that the Corinthians knew him pretty well, would he have dared to have written this passage, knowing that he would be judged by them with his own words? Of course that does not mean that Paul lived up to this terrific picture of love every minute of every day. But that he had spent his life and energy being what he was and doing what he was for the sake of other people, copying and embodying the love that Jesus himself had shown in dying on the cross, I think we can be sure. Remember what he said in Gal 2.20. Christ loved me and gave himself for me.

It is good to measure our present life with vs.4-7. Probably some of us have gone further ahead than others. Some of us will be frustrated that we have not improved much over a year or so. But don't be frustrated. This life is within reach of each one of us because it is the life of Jesus, the life inspired by the Spirit, the life which is the birthright within the the body of Christ.

What is more, as Paul insists – and this is the point of him saying all this here in the letter – this is the life which will bring the right sort of order to the chaos of faction-fighting and spiritual jealousy within the church. This is not just a good poem for wedding. It is ultimately good for everyone and for all of our churches as well.