

1 Cor 13. Without Love.

Over seven weeks we are going to explore the bible's most famous passage on love, 1 Corinthians 13.

This week I'll set the scene and explore the opening verses which are about the absence of love.

The Ancient Greek city of Corinth was a trading port between the Aegean and Ionian seas. It's estimated there were 650,000 people. It was a big city.



Small ships were hauled on a track-way from one sea to the other and the goods from larger ships were transported back and forth. There is now the amazing Corinth Canal. It was wealthy, it was a busy and was a city for open and unbridled sexual immorality. In fact "to Corinthianse" became a verb in Greek to mean "to practice sexual immorality".

The temple to Aphrodite the goddess of love was probably the largest of many temples in the city. The temple practised religious prostitution and it was thought there was at one time nearly a 1,000 sacred prostitutes were serving the temple. You cannot fail to get the irony; that in a city where the temple to the goddess of love is situated, St. Paul needs to teach about what love really is.

How relevant to our day and age.

I wonder how many of you watch "Love Island". I was aware of it and how it's a current TV phenomenon. I asked a member of the congregation who admitted to watching the programme to write me a brief description of what it is.



*Love Island is a dating reality TV series on ITV2 currently watched by 4 Million people every night.*

*The winning couple receive £50,000 and it is a much touted fact that more people applied to be candidates than applied to study at Oxford and Cambridge.*

1 Cor 13. Without Love.

*Contestants are transported to a paradise Mallorcan Villa where they meet their fellow "Islanders" as the show dubs them.*

*The choose their other halves on the basis of first impression and as episodes progress they have the chance to re-couple and find new partners on the basis of attraction or friendship. Throughout the series new islanders are brought in to disrupt the equilibrium and others are voted off either by the public or by fellow islanders.*

*It's voyeuristic watching – insecurities and human desire are laid bare against a backdrop of sun and boredom. Challenges punctuate the tedium to test the staying power on newly formed couples.*

On Wednesday I took an assembly with year 9 at Charters. Aged 13 and 14...virtually all of them watch Love Island.

When I told my daughter Helen (whose 22) she was shocked. I wouldn't let them watch it (she said) they will get totally the wrong idea about relationships and love.

Corinth. Love Island. There's nothing new under the sun.

We live in an age where there is confusion, misunderstanding and disappointment about love and where "love" – or sex to be more accurate, is ruthlessly used to market and sell products and programmes.

1 Corinthians 13 re-balances our understanding of love however it's not written to the world at large, but to the church.

St. Paul was in Ephesus and had received information from several sources that the church at Corinth was in trouble and seeking help. Factions were forming, immorality was intruding, and there were various concerns that St.Paul addresses in his letter.

Chapter 7 verse 1 begins "Now, the matters you wrote about" and he speaks about marriage, food sacrificed to idols, spiritual gifts and the collection!

One of the serious issues compounding the problems of this church was the spiritual gifts received through the work of the Holy Spirit and Chapter 12 is about that.

Prophecy, speaking in tongues, healing, miracles and all other works of the Spirit had become contentious and a means for infighting.

In Chapter 12 St.Paul uses the simple and effective illustration of the body to emphasize that we all belong to each other, we need to care for each other and serve one another. Spiritual gifts are there to serve each other.

*(When you find a quiet moment read chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians as it will illuminate the kind of issues the church faced).*

In chapter 13 St.Paul offers his one remedy for virtually all their ills. Everything spoken of in chapter 13 is to address a problem mentioned elsewhere in the letter.

1 Cor 13. Without Love.

For example love does not envy – because envy was an issue over the spiritual gifts.

Love is the answer. But it's not the love they think they know in the city of Corinth, but agape love, the love God shows to us. Sacrificial and perfect love, not self-seeking, but self giving. And that raises an interesting point. In the most famous passage on love in the Bible, God is not mentioned and Jesus is not mentioned.

Why is that?

It's because love can stand on it's own. So great is love, greater than any gift or aspect of spiritual life, it can stand alone with no external reference.

We know that God is love therefore any expression of love is an expression of God's character, although it's sadly warped and tainted and misused with great frequency.

But love is SO complete it doesn't need the external references here – but every time we say love, we could say God or Jesus (as you will see).

So to our three verses today.

Using himself as a reference, St. Paul points out that there is no spiritual gift, no work of faith and no sacrifice that has any value whatsoever unless there is love.

He describes himself as a noisy gong or cymbal (highly irritating) or as nothing, or gaining nothing...without love.

So central is love, so essential is love, if church operates without it, we are noisily irritating, as nothing and gain nothing.

Let's swap the word love in just one sentence.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have Christ, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If love isn't predominant in our thoughts, words and deeds – we have already lost the plot.

Throughout history, the church has frequently forgotten to love. Goodness knows how the Crusades were ever justified? Why was the predominantly white Church of England so unwelcoming to the Windrush generation of Christians? And how is it we allow argument to replace the command, love one another?

The most famous passage on love begins by explaining that any and all our activity without love, is noisily irritating, as nothing and gains nothing.

What does the generation growing up now understand of love?

If 252 year 9 students are watching Love Island, is this what they think love is about?

Love Island producer Richard Cowles has called the non-scripted show "aspirational, relatable and all about falling in love".

However, Cowles goes on: "If people don't like it they don't have to watch. We're not pretending to be anything other than an entertainment show that's a distraction from real life."

Love is downgraded to a commodity for our entertainment as it has been throughout history.

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The church has to do it's utmost to show genuine love.

It starts when we remember than without it, nothing whatsoever is of any value. Our exploration of love should begin with repentance for the many times we have forgotten love in favour of personal advantage or reputation. Or allowed ourselves to be too focused on achieving something and not caring about collateral damage.

A wonderful role model called the Revd. Trevor Severn said in a sermon over 12 years ago "I'd rather lose an argument in the church, than lose the love and unity we are called to demonstrate".

As we grow in our understanding of love over these 7 weeks, lets take to heart that the command to love, is above all others.