

We spent a whole term last year exploring that wonderful passage which we have just heard once again from 1 Corinthians. Let me repeat the final verse :

faith, hope and love abide, these three remain, and the greatest of these is love.

And I think we can be confident that Paul deliberately makes love the first virtue of the fruit of the Spirit in the Galatians passage we are looking at this summer because it is hard to imagine the other virtues flourishing without it.

The Christian life is rooted and grounded in love because God is love. Love is central to God's will and purpose. But as we have often said from this lectern God loved us first and our response is to learn to live loved.

Yes, I know I've used that phrase on a number of occasions, but it bears repeating once more as we continue to explore ways in which we can nurture and affirm God's love in and through our daily lives; in our relationships with other human beings. Not just our spouse our family and our circle of friends but with others who live in our community.

Love, particularly Jesus' love and our response to it was integral to New Wine's teaching this past week and the 60 or so church family members who attended should be applauded for their outworking of love in so many practical ways.

A sudden storm blew up on Tuesday afternoon when most people were off site on the delegate's day off and tents and gazebos were sent flying around and 3 of our church families returned to find part or the whole of their awnings or part of their tents missing.

The response from others was immediate and for the rest of the week those families were loved directly through offers of kindness, sharing of facilities and food, notwithstanding the torrential rain hindering the efforts. Our church family was not the only to do so as we heard of many similar situations throughout the site.

Those instantaneous outpourings of love will remain with me for a long time and reinforces the notion that God's love is permanent, is steadfast and is freely offered. God's love changes everything. It is incumbent on us to learn to live loved, to grow in the image of God, to be seen and known to share that love. That is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian – being willing to commit yourself to sharing God's love.

And sharing God's love is how we as a church try to live out the mission words under our tag line:

to live by faith, to be known by love, to be a light of hope

Let's think about three examples.

1. When we worship God, we are showing our love for God as well as sharing God's love with one another in our gatherings, particularly during communion. In the Eucharistic prayer F it says

Jesus showed us the way of salvation; loving us to the end, he gave himself to death for us.

Whilst sacrifice might be the essence of love; salvation is only achieved because of Christ's love for us and for nearly two thousand years, the faith of believers has been nourished and enriched when sharing together the bread and wine of the communion meal.

Whilst it might not be true of everyone, when I am kneeling at the altar rail I feel I am also kneeling at the cross – but I am never alone - because I believe not only is Christ present but also I have people either side of me doing exactly the same – sharing God's love.

2. When we engage with the community we are also sharing God's love with them. That is not to say

that God's love is only to be found in worshipping Christians, far from it. God's loves all of humankind whether or not they come within these walls every day, infrequently or never at all. Christ's legacy was his church; the body of Christ.

We are the body of Christ here in Sunningdale and how we treat other members of our community is an enduring measure of God's love. As Mother Teresa or St. Teresa of Calcutta, as she is now known once said:
It's not what you do, but how much love you put into it that matters

We are already engaging with the community in a number of ways; through the school, foodbank and supporting the bereaved. But the reality is that many of us more frequently engage with the community as individuals, not as the body of Christ. One of things the PCC will be looking at over the next year is to identify opportunities when we as a church can share God's love with the community more readily. Suggestions on a postcard to Jon, myself and the wardens please.

3. When the PCC adopted the concept of Transforming Trinity earlier this year, it did so out of the belief that this physical building should become the embodiment of our desire, as the body of Christ, to share God's love with all we encounter.

The first tentative steps in this transformation has already taken place; those who were visually impaired have given a big thumbs up to the installation of the screens; their ability to engage more fully in worship is very evident. The office has been moved to the vestry to enable the chapel to be restored as a space for quiet individual and corporate prayer and recently a man who very rarely comes to this church spent over an hour sitting quietly and prayerfully in there.

Our longer term aim is to reorder and extend this building so that we can share God's love more frequently; more widely and more creatively with our local and wider community. I suspect that it will take many years before we achieve our aim, and in the meantime let us never forget that we are doing so, not for any sense of self-importance or achievement but simply in order to leave a legacy where God's love is shared freely and frequently.

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