

Introduction

I'd like you to think for a moment about the one person that you love more than anyone else.

What is it about them that you love?

What does that love add to your life?

Now

Think about the one person you dislike more than any other

Why do you dislike them?

Imagine what it would cost you to love them?

What changes in yourself and your attitudes would be needed?

That is the nature of Christ's love for us. Paul tells us in Romans 5 that God demonstrates his own love for us in this: "Whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us" While we were hostile to him - Paul describes us in verse 10 as "God's enemies",

While we were indifferent to him and while there was nothing in us or our behaviour that was lovely or loveable - it was at that point that Christ willingly allowed himself to suffer and to die for us.

And it wasn't simply to rescue us from danger, or let us off the hook, though he did both those things too (rescue us from danger of eternal punishment, let us off the hook and gained forgiveness for us) His purpose in dying for us was so that he could have a close relationship with us. He died in order to get close to his enemies. He died so that we could be his friends. He died so that we could gain all the benefits of his love and forgiveness - and he did that when we had no thought for him, when we weren't interested in him, didn't care less about him and all our actions and thoughts were opposed to him.

I have told you before that I have never recovered from discovering how much Jesus Christ loves me. The fact that he thought me important enough to die for, the fact that he

wanted my friendship and love so much that he suffered to get it bowled me over at the age of 16 and I have never forgotten it. Christ's love for us tells us that we are valuable - to him valuable above all things. It tells us that there is something special and unique about us that means he wants a relationship with us, and what is more he values us so highly that if you or I were the only human being in the history of all time - he would still have died to re-establish a relationship with us

This is the nature of Christ's love. It is astounding in its character and its depth - and it is to that quality of love that he has called us. In John's Gospel we see him telling his disciples that they are to love one another as he has loved them. Jesus calls us as his followers to love others with his love, his commitment, his respect, his forgiveness, his patience and his understanding; Which is an enormously tall order.

But Paul tells us in that same passage in Romans 5 that God has poured out his love into our hearts by his Holy Spirit. God's presence in us brings transformation - not just in our relationship with him but also in our attitude and behaviour. With God's Spirit in our hearts we begin to learn how to love; To love not in a sentimental, romantic, fallible way but with the depth and quality of God himself.

We can learn to love but love cannot be "put on". It is either genuine or it isn't; which is where we run into problems in our Christian lives and as a Church family. We know, we are clear, that Christ has called us to love one another yet it is often hard to do and what we manage is at best a synthetic reproduction of the real thing.

When I was a student nurse I shared a flat with someone who on the surface was a 'model Christian' she was sweet and kind and generous. She always had a gentle smile on her face - I swear she even smiled as she slept so used had she got to smiling. Yet I could never get away from the feeling that her attitudes and behaviour were simply an act she put on. A way of behaving that was what she thought a good Christian should

be. She was always incredibly nice to everyone - so much so that I often tried to provoke her to see if I could find the cracks. This was because behind the 'nice behaviour' and Christian attitude there was no depth, no warmth. It wasn't Christ one saw but a very sweet person. She moved from the flat to live in a Christian community which was actually a dangerous sect - it was the love she saw there that attracted her to them and so she left and joined them.

Years later I met her again at a Christian conference. She had been through some very difficult times, had discovered the falseness of the idea she had been chasing, had been led into immorality and great hurt and God had sought her out and brought her back - and transformed her. It was clear that as she had struggled with her hurt and pain and let God into the depths of her heart he had filled her with his presence and his love positively flowed through her, she glowed now with his love in a way that she never had before. The love she had tried to show to others was a pale imitation of God's love flowing through her.

Jesus calls us to love each other with a love that is as strong and selfless as his love for us, yet we cannot simply manufacture that love so what are we to do. How do we manage when we are called not only to tolerate difficult people but to love them? I worked for about eighteen months in a home for retired missionaries which was a very interesting experience. I had gone there thinking it would be a holy and loving community - and of course it was full of God's love and presence but it didn't make difficult relationships any easier.

These people had been Victorian missionaries in China at the turn of the last century - in the 1900's. They had faced incredible hardship and difficulties to spread the Gospel and they were without exception extremely strong characters so there were many clashes of personality. Life was never boring and it changed my idea of what Christian love really was. There was one particular member of staff who had had a nervous breakdown

whilst serving in Thailand. I found her extremely difficult and try as I might to love her she simply irritated and annoyed me.

In the end I decided that I was never going to force myself to love her, that the only thing to do was to pray for her and to ask God to give me his love for her. It was amazing over the weeks and months that followed as I prayed for her needs and asked God to give me his love for her I found my attitude to her changing totally. I not only learned to tolerate her and be polite to her I found that I had begun to be fond of her, to be genuinely concerned for her and her needs and gradually and slowly God enabled me to love her. We were too different to be bosom buddies but I did genuinely learn to love her and it was God's Holy Spirit bringing about that change in me.

Love is a fruit of the Spirit and we need to pray and ask God to give us his love, to ask him to let it grow in our hearts and minds. As we open ourselves to God's love for us and embrace its depth and quality we find that not only is our love for God growing but that he enables us to love others deeply and genuinely, with his love.

Love is also an attitude of mind and heart. It is something we can decide to do and it is something that we need to work at. I always had an extremely difficult relationship with my stepmother. She treated me very badly and I disliked her deeply. It made it even harder that she was a Christian as well. I couldn't understand how someone who said they loved God could treat a stepdaughter so badly. I knew that God expected me to love and forgive her but that was something that I struggled with for years. There was one particular occasion when we had had a huge row.

She had treated me appallingly and I had packed my bag and was about to leave. Before I stalked out the door something made me sit down with my Bible and read this passage in Corinthians. I found it very difficult to read and it cut me to the heart. Read 1 Cor 13: 4-7)

You see love takes no excuses. This description of love tells us the standard that is expected of us - the standard of Christ's love for us. There is no let out clause it doesn't say - it is only rude if someone is rude to you. It doesn't say It isn't self-seeking unless the others aren't worth caring for. It doesn't say It is only angered when the other person deserves it. It doesn't say It only keeps record of terrible wrongs. It doesn't say Love only rejoices in evil done to someone else. It doesn't say it sometimes trusts, occasionally hopes and perseveres from time to time.

Paul tells us that God's love never fails. It never fails us. He is gentle and incredibly patient with us. He has a never ending supply of love which he lavishes upon us and what we are called to do is to learn not only to receive his love for us but to channel it towards others. In his epistle St John says This: "We love because he first loved us. If we say we love God yet hate a brother or sister, we are liars. For any of us who do not love a brother or sister, whom we have seen, cannot love God, whom we have not seen. And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love one another." The good news is that God has also put his love in our hearts as he has filled us with his Holy Spirit and as we seek his presence in our lives he will teach us increasingly to love him and to love others as he has called us to.

In our current situation all the measures we are taking are guided by love and care. It is driving the stringent hygiene measure and hand washing we are asking for, It is why we have stopped having physical contact whilst sharing the peace and why we have changed the way we administer communion and other aspects of our services.

The Benefice leaders are meeting this week for contingency planning so that we can continue to provide worship and pastoral care during this epidemic. We will be setting up a support network and communication will be key. Please take a moment to think: what is your position if you have to self-

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

isolate. What help might you need? What help might you be able to offer?

Panic is understandable

Selfishness isn't.

Let's be reassured how much God loves us; that he is present with us at this time and that perfect love drives out fear