

Seeing in a mirror dimly: 1 Corinthians 13

For now we see in a mirror, dimly,

but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part;

then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

1 Corinthians 13, Paul's short homily on love, is one of the best-known passages in the Bible. At our church, it is the most popular choice of wedding couples for their marriage service and the second most popular text for funerals. It is the text we turn to when we celebrate love and when we mourn the loss of a loved one.

Verses 4-7 comprise a powerful message about the forbearance that underpins all true and lasting love.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

These words should carry even the clumsiest preacher through a marriage service homily. Marriages flourish when marriage partners love each other, not in the way they most enjoy loving the other, but in the way that the other most needs to be loved. This is how Jesus loves us and this is how we are called to love each other.

I once led a marriage guidance session for engaged couples planning a church wedding and we looked at this text together and explored its

meaning. Marian helped me run the sessions and, with her permission, and occasional interjections, I shared with the couples my own experience of struggling to make a marriage work, my long search for understanding how Marian needed to be loved and my discovery of a sustained willingness to love her in those ways.

One couple were engrossed in intense conversation after this part of the session. A few weeks later they contacted me to say that they had decided after all not to get married. They loved each other and would continue to be friends but they had come to realise that they did not love each other in the way that Paul had described. This was sad news in a way because we were denied an opportunity to celebrate love in our church, but at the same time, there was relief that the couple would not embark on a marriage they realised they could not sustain.

When this text is chosen for a funeral service it is usually in recognition of the love that the deceased person gave to others and how that person's love underpinned so many other people's lives. The passage helps the congregation to consider that our lives continue to be underpinned by that love and that we can continue to love each other in the way the person who has died loves us. In a service that references the hope we have in the promise of eternal life, it is interesting to have a text that ends with the words;

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

But Paul did not write this text as marriage guidance or bereavement counselling. He is exalting love as the foundation of all our relationships, specifically in this text our relationships within church, but of course we may

extend the scope beyond that to include all our relationships.

By basing all our relationships on love we are seeking to imitate Christ. We seek to follow in his footsteps, picking up our cross as he carried his cross to die as the final statement of God's love for all humanity.

And we seek to love all those whom we encounter just as Jesus first and foremost loved all those whom he encountered. Even when Jesus met the arrogant rich young man who demanded to know how he would inherit eternal life, the Gospels tell us that Jesus loved him before saying the words that confounded him. (Mark 10:21)

As a first meditation today must therefore be in a moment of stillness to allow the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts and show us how we are to love those whom we are having difficult conversations at this time.

But for a second meditation I suggest we consider verses 9-12, verses that wedding couples often cut from their marriage service reading;

*For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;
but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.
When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.
For now we see in a mirror, dimly,
but then we will see face to face.
Now I know only in part;
then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

This is actually the part of this reading that I have come to love the

most. 'Seeing in a mirror dimly' is such a complete description of what living a life of faith feels like. And how wonderful it is to consider that one day we will 'know fully, even as we have been fully known'.

So our second meditation is this; to embrace our present imperfect understanding while giving thanks that, one day, our understanding will be complete.

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