



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany 2022 Year C

1 Corinthians 13. 1-13

Luke 2. 22-40

I enjoy Watching 'Lark Rise to Candleford.' In the second series a new maid Minnie arrives at the post office. Her advent really is a catalogue of disasters as she is young and totally inexperienced. She accidentally burns a hole in Thomas' bible and ruins a beloved wedding dress. Dorcas in exasperation says, 'Don't you understand it is not just a bible, it is not just a dress Minnie it is the love contained within them.' For her it is a treasured heirloom which symbolises the love she had for her mother, for Thomas it is his love of God. However even in her distress Dorcas has enough insight to realise that Minnie has no conception of love because she has never experienced it and that is the real tragedy.

I begin with this illustration because we need to get to what St. Paul means when he speaks of love. 'Love' is one overarching word that can have many meanings and it sometimes suffers because of that. It might be worth pausing here to think of all that the word love can encompass. I have conducted many weddings and each time it has been a great privilege. I was particularly moved when I conducted the marriage of my goddaughter. As she walked up the aisle on her father's arm I couldn't help it, tears poured down my cheeks because of my love for her. She was to be united in love to her husband. Our reading for today is often chosen as a reading at a wedding. Then it is a standalone poem on the nature of love and indeed in that it is both fitting and beautiful but the passage is so much more than that.

To begin with we must look at this passage in its context, it is not meant to be isolated; it is part of a whole. St. Paul is addressing the church at Corinth and his argument begins in chapter twelve and ends with chapter fourteen. So although our gospel reading is this poetic passage we must see it as part of the whole to understand its meaning fully. Think of what Paul has been talking about

previously, it is what we have studied for the last two weeks and these are the words immediately before our reading,

^{12.27} 'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.'

He had been talking about the community of the church and the God given gifts that must be used for the good of the whole. But we know that all is not well, there are factions, dissensions, arguments and feelings of superiority within the Corinthian church. These are new Christians but they are behaving in the old ways, they are behaving in ways that will destroy and fragment, not build up the body of Christ. Those former ways conform to their former standards and have to be put behind them. They are new Christians, they have a new life in Christ, They must show love for one another. They must aspire to the love shown by Jesus Christ, a love so strong that it led to Calvary and the outpouring of his life in love for all. Now if we read the passage in this light, this love, things become clearer.

^{13.1} 'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.'

St. Paul has been talking about gifts, gifts that God gives to each individual for use in his church. He mentions prophecy, great oratory, preaching, intelligence and understanding. We should read this in the light of what he has said of gifts in the earlier passages in chapter twelve. A person may have any or all of these gifts, honed to perfection. They may even give their life and become a martyr and that was common enough for persecuted Christians, but whatever the gifts they practise, whatever they do, if it is done without love it becomes useless. All we do we must do in Christ's way. Jesus spells out the meaning of love when he gives his new commandment. 'Love one another as I have loved you.' That is the point contained within St. Paul's words. This is the love he speaks of.

Think of the hymn, 'Brother, sister let me serve you. Let me be as Christ to you,' that is it in a nutshell. Faction, feelings of superiority, using your position or gifts to show off is not acceptable. It's worse than useless, it is actually destructive. That will not build up the body, it will destroy it. So then Paul describes love, the love embodied in Jesus, in this way.

⁴ 'Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.'

This is worth meditating on. The things Paul mentions, boasting, being arrogant and rude etc. could all have been applied to what was wrong in the Corinthian church. He condemns power seeking because love 'does not insist on its own way.' To show love however does not mean being a hearth rug; it does not mean condoning what is wrong; think of Jesus condemning the Pharisees. However, it does mean trying to follow the way of Jesus and thinking, 'What would Jesus want me to do?' Certainly showing forgiveness when we are wronged is important. Jesus forgave those who were crucifying him. That is the epitome of love. Paul is pointing out that thoughts of self and putting

yourself first simply will not do. No gift is our gift; it is God given so feelings of superiority are ridiculous. The point is, the question to ask is, how can these gifts be used in love to build up the whole, the church as the body of Christ? I love Paul's comment that love 'rejoices in the truth.' It always reminds me of St. John's words the 'truth will set you free.'

⁸ 'Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.'

Paul is talking of the time when God will bring all to perfection, when all will be completed. God's new creation broke into the world at the resurrection but it will be perfected in God's time and Jesus, the Messiah, our King will rule over all. It will be a time when, 'Justice shall roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.' Love will be at the centre of God's perfected order so, though other things will come to an end, love never will.

All God given gifts are needed in this world and in his church but one day, 'the day of perfect righteousness the promised day of God;' all these partial things will no longer be needed. It is when 'the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.'

And so, says Paul, using the metaphor of human life,

¹¹ '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. ¹²For 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.'

It is like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis or a child who is in every way immature, learning and growing to maturity. Well now, in this imperfect world, we can only see in part as if we were looking in a mirror and see only a reflection of what is. Incidentally everything you see in a mirror is back to front. It is not reality, only a shadow. That's why I love the old translation,

'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.'

It has the dimension of the darkness of our understanding now in contrast to when all shall be clearly revealed in God's light. God holds us in the palm of his hand he knows us intimately, everything is known to him and nothing is hidden. We, on the other hand, only see partially. As a candle is to the sun so is our understanding of God now. But finally all will be known.

¹³ 'And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.'

What we have now is faith and hope. Faith and trust in our God and his promises won through Jesus. We have Jesus who at his incarnation took on our humanity and is with us now. We believe that, in God's time, all will be perfected. For now, we have the example of Jesus to guide us and Jesus was the pattern of perfect love. Therefore we must try to follow him. There is nothing stronger, nothing greater than love, Jesus proved that at Calvary. Paul knew that the greatest was love for where love is there can be no dissention, no power seeking, no anger or strife. For a community to work in harmony love and respect must be at the centre.

St. Paul was writing to the church at Corinth but his words echo through history to us and to all Christians. In our lives, in our community and in the Christian Church, the centre must be love, the

motivation must be love. Jesus is the head, we are his body and he is with us always. Every single human being is precious in God's sight, he created us and he loves us. It is important that we see each other as children of our heavenly Father and value and care for each other and all people.

Our gospel reading is the account of Christ's presentation in the Temple at Jerusalem. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple is celebrated on 2nd of February, which is forty days after Christmas. There is a saying about this day 'one look back to Christmas then turn towards the cross;' that is absolutely true. We are at the end of the Christmas/Epiphany season and next Sunday we move to the Sundays before Lent. It is quite legitimate to leave Christmas decorations up for the whole of this season and remove them at Candlemas. A few years ago I saw a television interview with a priest who was talking about Candlemas and she explained why her Christmas lights were in the background. Indeed my wooden nativity still stands in our lounge.

This festival, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, is one of the oldest in the Christian church dating back to the early fourth century. Commonly known as Candlemas now, it got its name because of a tradition of candlelight processions to church where at the service the candles were blessed. This still happens though usually each person in the congregation receives a candle in church and they are blessed during the service. I think it is one of my favourite services. Sitting in a darkened church with flickering candlelight and listening to the Nunc Dimittis, the Song of Simeon being sung and then being quiet in prayer is very moving.

So Jesus' parents take him to the Temple in Jerusalem to fulfil the law. The Temple at Jerusalem was built by King Solomon and the Ark of the Covenant was kept in the holy of holies. It was regarded as the very presence of God within the Temple. Disaster struck when the Babylonians overran Jerusalem in BC 546 they destroyed the Temple; the Ark was never seen again. Zedekiah the king was taken into slavery and most of the people with him. Only a few poor people were left in the city. We can only imagine the desolation and pain felt by the nation. Their Temple had been destroyed and the Ark which they regarded as the presence of God had gone and so many were in exile. We think of Psalm 137

'By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?'

When they returned from exile a second Temple was built. It was extended and beautified under Herod the Great and stood resplendent on Temple Mount. But something was still missing. It was to this wonderful building which would have shone out in white and gold, that Joseph, Mary and the young child Jesus came forty days after his birth. His parents have obeyed the law to the letter. On the eighth day Jesus was circumcised and named. Next the requirement was that Mary was to go for purification and Jesus, as the first born male, was to be presented in the Temple as sacred to God. Mary and Joseph would have seemed very insignificant to the bustling crowds. They are very poor and just one family in the many who have come to the Temple as required.

‘Now when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

Our readings over the past few weeks have told of vital moments in Jesus’ life, times of affirmation and confirmation of who he is. They are if you like epiphany moments. We have the Epiphany itself, when as the magi gaze in wonder at the child the scales fall from their eyes and they see the newborn King. There is the baptism of Christ when the voice from heaven affirms Jesus as God’s Son and the Spirit descends upon him. There is the first miracle at Cana, and then Jesus proclaiming in the synagogue at Nazareth, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ In other words, I am the anointed one, I am the Messiah. Well here, forty days after the birth is another proclamation, another clear sign, there are no clouds of angels here but an old man.

²⁵ ‘Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, . . .

Simeon is vitally important because he has received this revelation from God, he would not die before he saw the Messiah. Again we are told of the presence of the Holy Spirit and he goes to the Temple ‘guided by the Spirit.’ When the parents hand the child Jesus over to him Simeon knows who this is. He proclaims it in those words that are still said or sung at services today, the words of the Nunc Dimittis, that simply means ‘now let depart’ and reflect his first words on seeing Jesus.

²⁹ ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.’

Just look at what he says and its significance. This is Simeon’s epiphany moment; he sees Jesus and knows this is the promised Messiah. Luke is clearly giving his readers another sign here. Now Simeon can die in peace, now he has seen the Messiah. He describes Jesus as ‘your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.’ Jesus is the son of God; he will win salvation for Israel and all people.

Just as with the magi who were Gentiles Simeon stresses that Jesus will be ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles.’ Jesus comes to all. Think of the opening words of St. John’s gospel,

‘What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’

Jesus is the light of the world. As I see the candles gleaming in a darkened church at Candlemas I always think of these words.

Simeon recognised that this was the very presence of God entering once more into the Temple. So the Temple is transformed. No doubt he thought of these words from Psalm 24,

‘Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory.’

This is the Psalm always set for Candlemas. Jesus is the King of Glory foretold by the prophets and recognised by Simeon. Yet still Mary and Joseph are amazed by what has happened, no doubt Mary ‘pondered these things in her heart.’ After the blessing Simeon turns to Mary. His words are prophetic.

‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

Simeon sees the glory but he also sees the division, the pain, the sadness. ‘Look back at Christmas and on to the cross’ that is exactly what happens. Simeon foresees that Jesus’ life will cause division and strife as well as great hope and deliverance. There will be great reward for all who follow him, for all who accept God’s Son but there will also be suffering. There will be persecution and opposition. There will be a great battle between love and hate, between evil and good. That battle will be fought by Jesus himself at Calvary but that battle will be won and Jesus, our God will rise and win salvation for us.

Mary herself will suffer and Simeon’s words to her ‘and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’ take us to the foot of the cross. Mary will have to watch as her Son suffers an agonising death; but Mary does the only thing she can do then, she gives her son love. For me that image will always be captured by the beautiful life-sized rood screen which stood over the chancel arch at Comberford Church and I hear the words of Jesus, John 19.²⁶ ‘When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.’

This is the epitome of love.

The focus now moves to Anna. Luke, as always, is very specific in detail.

³⁶ ‘There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.’

Anna is old, she has seen her share of distress, she is described as a prophet and we know her origin. She is a devout Jew and worships every day in the Temple. She, like Simeon, is awaiting the fulfilment of God’s promises foretold by the prophets. Anna too knows that this child is special; her recognition is as instantaneous and as certain as Simeon’s. Significantly the first thing she does is to witness.

³⁸ 'At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.'

So here we have them, Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna, we can see them as the first community of believers. Jesus is the Messiah; he is the Saviour of all peoples. He is the presence of God in the Temple.

³⁹ 'When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.'

We know little about Jesus' childhood and early years but we do know what Luke tells us here. God was with Jesus and throughout his life. A life no doubt of prayer, worship and learning, God was with him preparing him for his mission to come.

St. Paul called himself an Apostle to the Gentiles; Simeon says Jesus is 'a light to lighten the Gentiles.' Jesus comes to all people. We are known and loved by him. When Simeon and Anna see the child Jesus they proclaim the truth about him. What strikes me about the meeting is the love and joy we see. Love and joy is what people should see in us. Worshipping God is our joy, a love and joy open to all people.

'Give me love in my heart keep me serving; give me love in my heart I pray.' Traditional

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