

Wednesday, 16th September

1Cor.13

The reading we have just heard for our New Testament lesson is one of the most well-known in our Bible. Many, many engaged couples have chosen it as the reading they wish to have at their wedding, and it is really a gift for the priest officiating to expound upon. A young couple embarking on married life would do well to attempt to follow the words they hear:

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

It does not insist on its own way.

Excellent advice for those being joined together in holy matrimony!

Of course, times have changed and couples who approach a priest – or wedding co-ordinator – are usually living together already. They know each other's foibles and experience some of the ups and downs of life together, so that is not the new and strange experience which it used to be. Marriage offers them permanence and the public acknowledgement that they intend to spend the rest of their lives together – though sadly that intention fails much more often than it used to do.

But the advice just cannot be bettered!

However, Paul was writing this letter to the new Christians of Corinth, and it is obvious from other parts of the letter that they are a wayward group, easily swayed by the more worldly attitude of other citizens. There are also disputes within the church itself, groups taking sides, claiming that they belong to

one church leader or another. Paul admonishes them quite firmly, reminding them that they belong to Christ and no other, emphasizing the need for unity. Then, after, hopefully showing them the error of their ways he sets out how they should behave towards one another. After seeking to break down the barriers they have set up within the new church, he then proceeds to build them up with this wonderful piece of writing.

But strive for the greater gifts, we read at the end of chapter twelve, and I will show you a still more excellent way.

Paul's 'Hymn to love' as it is sometimes called, is a unique, lyrical piece of writing which says everything that needs to be said on the subject.

However, despite its popularity as a reading for a wedding, this does not refer to married love. It does not even refer to the love within a family, father to child, child to mother. Its message is much more challenging, because, says Paul, this is how Christians are to behave, not only towards one another, but to everyone they meet. This is a description of Christian love.

Of course, it is impossible to live up to these high, demanding standards in very part of their lives. Paul is presenting those early Christians with a template. 'This is how you should love,' he says. 'Forget the bickering and backbiting, everything that demeans you and makes you less worthy of calling yourselves followers of Christ. Follow this example, picking yourselves up when you fail, but aiming at the perfect love illustrated here.'

Nothing, he says, is greater than love.

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

After expressing his frustration at the wayward Corinthians, Paul shows them how they really should behave.

In our Gospel reading Jesus is also expressing frustration with those he is addressing. ‘Just what do you want?’ he is saying. ‘You are just like children squabbling and not being satisfied by anything.’

John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, He has a demon’; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!’

We can hear the frustration in his words as nothing seems to please those listening to him.

So, as we compare these two readings, it is made clear what we should really do, the actions we should follow. We acknowledge our own weaknesses and failings – too quick to criticize, too apt to be dissatisfied. As twenty-first century Christians we are to follow the more excellent way, the example which Jesus himself gave, to accept the asceticism of John the Baptist and the humanity of Jesus, to be emissaries of the Gospel and to show the love expressed in Paul’s lyrical hymn.

And when we fail, as inevitably we will, we trust that our fellow Christians will forgive us and encourage us on the journey.

Amen