

NOT ONLY AT WEDDINGS¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, 30 January 2022

Our Epistle reading today is one of the most recognisable passages from the writings of St Paul. We hear it mainly at weddings. Quite frankly, I wouldn't now want it at my wedding. Although I remember little of our actual ceremony in 1963, which is not unusual for significant events, parts of chapter 13² were required to be read at Methodist marriages. As a wedding reading, it appears to set an impossibly high standard, only to be chosen by those without experience. I cannot tell you how many times I must have failed in the 58 years that have passed. For a proper list you will need to ask Bev.

The question is whether we understand what Paul is doing in this chapter. Most probably not because its constant nuptial use essentially trivialises it, just as our romanticising of love trivialises marriage. If nothing else, its popularity takes it out of context.

Why did Paul write to the church at Corinth at all? After all, he had established churches in many places. As far as we know, only several received letters from him. Each letter had a purpose, a stimulus, to its writing. It's not difficult to find out about this letter, because Paul himself tells us:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.³

We don't know any more about Chloe but her message to Paul was clear; things were not good in the church at Corinth. They quarrelled. Their quarrels must have been serious enough for Paul first to hear about them and second to act on what he had heard. Indeed, at one point he asks his readers, "What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?"⁴

The church had divided itself into parties corresponding to the various evangelists who had passed by. They included Paul, Peter, and Apollos. Apollos was a highly educated Jewish Christian from Alexandria in Egypt, where there was a strong philosophical tradition. He is mentioned in Acts, when he visited Ephesus and where he was described as "eloquent [and] well versed in the scriptures".⁵ There was also a fourth party appropriating the title of "Messiah followers". In a grasp for power that has become quite familiar, this group claimed a monopoly on genuineness by going back to the source, rejecting any intermediaries.

The church at Corinth also suffered from social divisions. As was usual in early church communities, they had both Jewish and Gentile members. These groups argued about the observance of traditional Jewish law. The Gentiles had come from a world without the rituals that were customary in diaspora Jewish communities. Such customs operated to bind the

¹ Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

² Verses 4-8, 13

³ 1 Corinthians 1:10-11

⁴ 1 Corinthians 4:21

⁵ Acts 18:27-19:1

community together, to create a culture that was distinct and self-supporting. Understandably, Jewish converts did not want to dispose of them. Also understandably, the Gentile converts did not want to adopt them.

One of the most significant of these differences was eating food that had been dedicated to idols, that is, most of the food available in the Corinthian market. Jewish converts were appalled by this, Gentile converts not so much.

Paul criticises various kind of misbehaviour from sexual immorality, “a person living with his father’s wife”, to disputes leading to court cases. In addition to this, the community was divided over the roles exercised by various members. These roles ranged from speaking in tongues, to prophecy.

This issue leads Paul to expound, in chapter 12, his idea of the body where every part is essential. He says that one part cannot say that it does not need another. Even the apparently most prestigious body parts are dependent on the least attractive. We read this last week

The chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are the work of later editors. Sometimes they are helpful, sometimes not. Today is one of the unhelpful divisions. In particular, the last sentence of chapter 12, “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way”, has been detached from the first verse of chapter 13, allowing us to read it out of context.

In its context, we can see that chapter 13 is not so much a definition of love as the assertion that love is the way out of the problems facing the Corinthian church. Paul does not accuse them from a distance. He begins the chapter with personal references, “If I speak”. The actions that follow are ones at which Paul excels, but which he declares to be worth nothing without love. Perhaps Paul acknowledges here that he is a cantankerous, argumentative person. Indeed, as Tom Wright suggests, 1 Corinthians could have been written only if Paul acknowledged what everyone knew.

It seems to me impossible to imagine that this passage could have been written in a very personal letter by the founder of a community, to that community, *unless he knew, and he knew that they knew, that this is the kind of person he himself was.*⁶

The list of the Corinthian faults is unforgiving: impatience, unkindness, envy, boastfulness, arrogance, rudeness, insisting on having their own way, irritableness, resentfulness, valuing wrongdoing, failing to believe the truth and giving up too early. In fact, the features of everyday life. Only love can counter these deeply entrenched vices. There is nothing romantic or casual about the love that Paul describes. It is the product of deep commitment and of the will.

Paul is not, however, offering a challenge to people to achieve the improbable or impossible. He reminds his hearers of the ephemeral nature of the things that they now value so highly and which led to conflict in the first place. All this will pass away. Only love will remain. So, he says, grow up. “When I was a child, I acted like a child. When I grew up, I acted like an adult”.

He then uses the analogy of the mirror. Corinth was famous for the quality of its bronze work. It was so fine that it could be highly polished to make mirrors. Yet, ancient mirrors, however, good, did not have the quality of modern glass mirrors; their reflections were blurred. All his

⁶ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (New Testament for Everyone), London, SPCK, p. 171

readers knew what he was saying. His analogy directed their attention to the coming fulfilment of all things when we shall see Jesus face-to-face and be known fully. This is another warning about valuing oneself too highly. It is also a warning to take a long view of things, not the short term. As Charles Campbell says:

Paul is not saying that love is gullible or indiscriminate in believing and hoping. Rather, Paul affirms that there are no limits to the faith, hope, and endurance of love.⁷

I would not be open with you if I did not draw to your attention how like the church in Corinth is the church of today. I imagine that, here at St James, we could show those characteristics, but I am not principally referring to us. I refer to the wider church in which we find ourselves. Our next General Synod, due later this year, will face our divisions over sexuality. If we thought that our past disputes about the ordination of women were difficult and damaging, just wait for this one. We will hear claims about “speaking the truth in love”, but those who are the subject of those discussions will feel little of the claimed love.

Much of the discussion will once again revolve around disputed passages of scripture. Indeed, although debates about the meaning of scripture have always been part of the Christian journey, adherence to specific interpretations will be made into an article of faith, without which none can be Christian. So, I thought that it might be useful to consider what Augustine of Hippo said about judging people wrong in their interpretation. In his book on Christian doctrine, he argued that love is the measure of correct biblical interpretation. In effect, a faulty interpretation leading to love is better than an accurate one that does not. He said:

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbour, does not yet understand them as he ought. If, on the other hand, a man draws a meaning from them that may be used for the building up of love, even though he does not happen upon the precise meaning which the author whom he reads intended to express in that place, his error is not pernicious, ...⁸

Earlier, in the second century, Tertullian, who came from Carthage, about 230km from Augustine’s Hippo in North Africa, made love the identifying mark of the Christian community.

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. *See*, they say, *how they love one another*, ... how they are ready even to die for one another, ...⁹

That is not our reputation now.

We have no way of controlling the behaviour of other parts of our larger Anglican community, even though some of them might like to control ours. We can do two things. We can first do our best to heed Paul’s teaching in our own community. Second, we can do our best to heed Paul’s teachings in our relations with others. History shows that neither of these things is automatically easy for us. But there is no excuse for us not trying.

⁷ Charles Campbell, *1 Corinthians (Belief: a Theological Commentary on the Bible)* Louisville, Westminster 2018, p. 220

⁸ [Augustine, On Christian Doctrine: Preface/Book I \(georgetown.edu\)](http://georgetown.edu) Augustine of Hippo, *De doctrina Christiana*, 1:

⁹ Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 39.7, [Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III: The Apology \(tertullian.org\)](http://tertullian.org)

I have, while spending most of my time at home, been reading Catherine Fox's series of novels about the contemporary Church of England, a kind of 21st century Barchester chronicles. She examines their debates about women bishops, sexuality and the future of the church through the lives of members of the fictional Diocese of Lindchester. Her characters are single, partnered, divorced, straight, gay, more or less happy, and deeply troubled. At one point, the woman Dean of Lindchester, in some despair, confides her fears to her husband:

He puts his arms round her and kisses her forehead. "Ah, love, let us be true to one another." "Yes," she says. "Yes." And later, the Eucharist. The table where we cannot unfriend, unfollow, block or mute our brothers and sisters. Eat. Drink. Love. We are all one body. We have to hang on to one another now. At all costs.¹⁰

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.¹¹

¹⁰ Catherine Fox, *Realms of Glory*, London, SPCK, p. 315. The four novels are: *Acts and Omissions*; *Unseen Things Above*; *Realms of Glory*; *Tales from Lindford*. [Catherine Fox's Lindchester Chronicles books in order \(fantasticfiction.com\)](#) see also [A Trollopian chapter closes \(churchtimes.co.uk\)](#) (This article was written before the fourth novel was published.)

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 13: 13



Christian Inscription at Corinth



Icon of St Paul on cave wall in Ephesus.
Possibly the oldest representation of Paul.

AUTHOR OF ACTS AND OMISSIONS

catherine
fox
realms of
glory

