

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13 ST JOHN'S, 3.2.19, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

The first time I came into contact with people who exercised supernatural spiritual gifts was while I was at university. Up until then, my experience of church life was of very traditional Anglicanism. So it was all rather a shock to the system!

At the time, I was struggling in my faith, and desperate to know more and grow deeper. But I very soon decided that I wanted nothing to do with these 'charismatics'. They may have been speaking in tongues, praying for and receiving healing, and receiving words of knowledge, but there seemed to be very little love in them. It seemed to me that these people were showing off; it seemed to me that their message was that as I didn't speak in tongues, or exercise any other supernatural gifts, I couldn't be a real Christian. I very quickly came to the conclusion that the fruit of the Spirit was far more important than the gifts of the Spirit.

IF I HAVE NO LOVE, I AM NOTHING

I didn't have a clue back then what good company I was in! The apostle Paul himself, who in the next chapter writes, *I want you all to speak in tongues . . . I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you* (14:5,18). Paul encourages people to exercise supernatural gifts, but he's far more concerned that the believers in Corinth grow the spiritual fruit of love.

This chapter is very familiar, and is often read out of context, especially at weddings. You may be wondering why I've started speaking about spiritual gifts, when the passage is so clearly about love. Well, chapters 12 to 14 form a continuous argument in Paul's letter. Paul is writing about spiritual gifts, and how to use them. They're not for showing off, and they're definitely not a proof that the people exercising them are in any way 'super-spiritual'. Spiritual gifts are love-gifts from God to his church, and if we exercise them without love we are nothing – except maybe noisy gongs or clanging cymbals.

A SHORT LESSON IN NT GREEK

I've spoken a few times recently about the difficulties caused by translating Scripture into different languages – remember the Inuit, who have no words for sheep or lamb, and call Jesus 'the baby seal of God'? In this passage, and so many more in the NT on the subject of love, we come up against the weakness of our own language. We use the word 'love' to mean lots of different things! My dictionary has 18 definitions, although they do overlap! But here are a few examples:

1. In tennis, we use 'love' to mean a score of zero
2. In one of the books my children had when they were small, there was a picture of a little boy saying 'I love chocolate biscuits'
3. We talk about 'loving' to do something, like *the hypocrites*, who Jesus says *love* (φιλεω) *to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen* (Matt 6:5)
4. We love our friends and family
5. We use 'love' to describe sexual desire or longing for someone - and we talk about being 'in love'

6. My dictionary defines 'love' in a Christian sense as meaning: a) God's benevolent attitude towards man; b) man's attitude of reverent devotion towards God.

When people hear 1 Corinthians 13 read at a wedding, inevitably they're thinking mainly about the kind of love which we describe as being 'in love'. The Greeks would have used the word *ερωσ*, from which we get words like erotic, to describe this kind of love. This isn't the word Paul uses here.

The Greek word for non-sexual love, the kind of love we have for our friends and family, and even for 'loving' to do something, is *φιλια*.

There are lots of words in English which have *φιλια* as part of their root - eg philharmonic means fond of music; bibliophile means someone who loves books.

But the Greek word for 'love' which Paul uses throughout this passage is the noun *αγαπη*. In other Greek texts written during C1 AD, this word is very rare. It expresses the highest and noblest form of love, the form of love which sees something infinitely precious in the person who receives this love. This word, *αγαπη*, or the verb *αγαπαω*, is the word for love which NT writers use most often. To love with *αγαπη* love isn't to do with how we *feel* about a person. It's more a matter of deciding to love someone, no matter how we feel about them. It's about self-sacrifice. It's about seeking the best for someone at our own expense. If we love that person with what the Greeks called *ερωσ* or *φιλια*, it makes it a lot easier to love them with *αγαπη* love. But we don't need to love them in any other sense; we don't even *need* to like them!

This is the kind of love which Paul's writing about in this passage. this is the kind of love which is *patient and kind . . . does not envy or boast; . . . is not arrogant or rude . . . not irritable or resentful; which doesn't rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth; which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

When we realise just what Paul means by 'love', we realise that it's only God's children who can possibly have this quality of love. And if we want to know what this kind of love is like, when it's not spoiled by human sin, we need to look at God himself. *God is love* in himself, as John tells us (1 John 4:8,16). This kind of love is God's very nature; he can't help but love with this *αγαπη* love.

LOVE IS ETERNAL

The believers in Corinth were convinced that they'd 'arrived' spiritually because they spoke in tongues, preached inspired messages and received words of knowledge. But Paul points out that none of these things will last: *prophecies . . . will pass away; . . . tongues . . . will cease; . . . knowledge . . . will pass away . . . when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away* (vv 8,10). When Jesus returns, we won't need prophecies, or tongues, or knowledge, because then our knowledge of God will be complete.

On the other hand, *love never ends* (v 8). It continues for ever, because God is love, and he is eternal. Love is even greater than faith and hope, vital those these are to our spiritual growth.

CONCLUSION

It's easy to be dazzled if we see supernatural spiritual gifts being exercised. If we hear people speaking in tongues, or if someone gives us a word from the Lord which seems to be 'spot on', we can think that these people must be really special to have received these gifts from God.

We need to remember that spiritual gifts, even supernatural ones, are just that – gifts, given by our loving heavenly Father, not to individuals, but to the church. And we need to remember that they're not essential, or even necessarily helpful, to the spiritual growth of the individual who exercises them. The hallmark of a Christian believer is not supernatural gifts, but *love* – love in the sense that Paul writes about it here, *αγαπη*-love, which has all these amazing qualities, and which reflects the nature of God himself. We mustn't make the mistake of idolising supernatural gifts – whether the Lord has given them to us, or to other people.

Neither must we dismiss supernatural gifts out of hand. I started by saying that my early experience of charismatic Christians led me to the conclusion that the fruit of the Spirit was far more important than the gifts of the Spirit. That's true, but it's not the whole story. All spiritual gifts, whether or not they're obviously supernatural, are God's love-gifts to his church. We need them precisely because we don't yet have complete knowledge of God, and we don't yet live in heaven where everything's perfect. In the first few verses of chapter 14, Paul tells the

believers at Corinth to *pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts . . . so that the church may be built up* (14:1,5).