

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray and to give more than either we desire or deserve: pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Romans 12.9–end: ⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ ²⁰ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 16.21–end: ²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’ ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷ ‘For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’

Reflection given by Benefice Reader David Teall:

If you look up today's Epistle in a copy of the NRSV Bible that includes headings you will find that Chapter 12 is headed The New Life in Christ and the section from verse 9 onwards that we heard this morning is headed Marks of the True Christian. So, with these headings in mind, let us listen again to verses 9 and 10:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.

The very first Mark of the True Christian in this list is for our love to be genuine, though Paul does not give us much of a clue in this part of his letter to the Romans about what he means by love in this context. Interestingly, when we look at the original Greek text, he uses a different word for love in verse ten when we are encouraged to 'love one another with mutual affection'. The word used for love here is *philia*, which means brotherly or comradely love, but the word used in verse nine for the love that must be genuine is *agape*.

The word agape, appears in the New Testament over 200 times. It is often defined as the highest form of love: the love that God has for each of us and the love that we are called to have for him and for all our neighbours. To define it further I can do no better than read to you from Chapter 13 of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians in which the word used for love is exclusively agape:

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.

In the Summary of the Law that we hear just before we make our confession in our celebration of Holy Communion we hear these words based on Matthew 22: 37–40 in which both instances of the word love are translated from agape.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.

During my lifetime there has been an ever-increasing cry that our modern materialistic society has lost the capacity to express agape – unselfish love for our neighbours. One of the brightest silver linings to the dark cloud of the pandemic that has engulfed us this year is the clarity with which this has been shown to be untrue. Agape has not gone away – it has been shown in abundance by the selfless love and devotion of the workers in the NHS who have put their own lives at risk to save others. It has been shown too by shopkeepers, delivery drivers, police officers, postal workers, priests, ambulance drivers, lifeboat crews, coastguards, refuse collectors and, indeed, by every front-line worker in the land far too numerous for me to mention here.

But what about the rest of us? Love – agape love – is clearly a very important emotion for a Christian to be able to express, but how good are we at actually doing so? It's a pretty big ask, isn't it, to express the highest form of love to a neighbour. Are there, perhaps some steps along the way that can help us?

Well, yes, there certainly are, and one very good early step is sympathy. To express sympathy for a person suffering from an illness or going through a tough time at home or work is clearly much better than showing indifference, but is it love, and more specifically, is it agape love, the love that we are commanded to show for one another?

Not yet, I would suggest. Sympathy is undoubtedly a good emotion, but it is often expressed when we are looking at a situation and seeing it through our own eyes. As such, it can be a little distant or detached and, at times, even a little patronising, giving the impression of looking down on the sufferer. To take the next step we need to come down from that possibly haughty pinnacle, cross the space between us and the sufferer, turn around, place ourselves alongside them and look outwards at the situation through their eyes. This is empathy rather than sympathy, and it is much, much closer to agape love.

So, if empathy is an important step along the way to showing that selfless, agape love to our neighbours, what can we do to improve the way we express it? The first and most important ingredient, I would suggest, is time. If you want to help someone in distress, particularly emotional distress, it is going to take time, lots of time. Time is the greatest gift you can give, so be generous and give all you can.

Having made the time available, the next most important thing to do is to listen – really listen. Don't rush to produce a solution (that's a particular failing us men tend to suffer from) – just listen. And, as you listen, make sure you listen with an open mind, and keep it open. If you jump to an early conclusion, or categorise what you hear according to your own set of values, that is not empathy – that is looking at the situation through your eyes, not theirs. Only when you have heard the whole story and seen it through the eyes of the sufferer can you begin to work, with them, to find a solution.

At this point in my reflection I would normally look for a real-world example to give you to illustrate my point but, since March, the real world for Pat and me has been confined to Blatherwycke and a couple of the footpaths that pass through the village. However, despite this isolation, or maybe because of it, I am still able to give you a couple of examples of empathy that have improved our quality of life.

There is one particular Asda delivery driver who, rather than offloading our shopping as quickly as possible, takes the time to sort it carefully into different boxes and to engage in a friendly chat as I hang out of our upstairs window to greet him. He clearly has the gift to see the world as we see it, and we thank him for it.

When out on our walks, all the people we know, and occasionally some we don't, continue to make a conscious effort to pass by or chat from two metres or more away. In normal times, of course, that would be a strange thing to do but, in the current crisis, it is an act of love, the genuine love of which Paul spoke, and we thank them for it. Amen