



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Quinquagesima Sunday, February 26th, 2017

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

It would be really nice to avoid preaching on today's communion epistle – the 13th Chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. I've preached on it for more than 30 years or so and it gets tedious preaching on the same text. I'd very much like to give a Quinquagesima sermon on something else for a change.

But the uncomfortable reality is that it is impossible to avoid preaching on it, because this passage by St Paul encapsulates the very essence of our faith.

The 13th chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians amounts to Christianity 101. If you learn nothing more about the Christian faith than this, you will have learned enough. That, at least, is St. Paul's view – and he should know.

It doesn't matter what you say or do. It doesn't matter how much money you give away. It doesn't matter how well you know Scripture or how much you say you love God. If you don't have charity in your heart – all that preaching, all that giving, all those hours of study, all those professions of love will have been a pure waste of your time.

This is a most disturbing thought. If St. Paul has got things right, we need totally to redefine the way we think about charity. From St. Paul's standpoint, charity isn't simply a matter of writing checks to worthy causes or volunteering at a local museum or hospital. Certainly, it can – and should – involve that sort of activity, but, from the Christian perspective, charity is very much more than that.

The Greek word that the translators of the King James' Bible interpreted as "charity" is rendered as "love" in modern editions of the Bible. As a consequence the 13th Chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians is now a favorite reading at weddings.

To previous generations of Christians, however, the notion of reading the 13th chapter from the First Epistle to the Corinthians at a wedding would seem decidedly weird because there is absolutely nothing romantic or erotic about the emotion St. Paul is talking about – an emotion the Greeks called "*agape*."

English speakers use the word "love" to express a whole gamut of emotions. Because of this we need modifiers to define the sort of love we are talking about – brotherly love, for instance, maternal love, erotic love and love of mankind. The Greeks, by contrast, had different words for all those various types of love.

The word *agape* means solely the love of mankind. It cannot be interpreted in any other way. It cannot, for instance, be used to describe fraternal or paternal love or the love a wife has for her husband. *Agape* has only one meaning and that is love for mankind – and in English the word for that kind of love is charity.

The 13th Chapter of I Corinthians tells us when it comes to our relations with our fellow men, it's not enough to ACT in a friendly and open hearted fashion. Generosity is not good enough. Not only must we behave charitably towards them, we must

actually *FEEL* charitably about them – and not just people we like, but the people who positively get on our nerves and under our skin.

This is tough stuff. It isn't easy to feel affection for unpleasant or unlovely people. It is not really possible to acquire such feelings by practice, although practice helps. Christian love is best developed through prayer. Bearing this in mind, it's worth pondering why God sets such store on a virtue human beings find so difficult to acquire; a virtue that demands we not only act lovingly towards our fellow men, but also genuinely feel lovingly about them, too.

St. Paul says that, in this life, when we contemplate the nature of God, we are like little children trying to puzzle out shapes and shadows in an ancient mirror that has lost most of its reflective qualities. Our tiny finite brains aren't capable of grappling with the infinite. In the next life we shall know all there is to know. But for time being we're going to have to be content with the ancient mirror.

There is, however, one aspect of the Godhead that we can come closer to understanding than others. God tells us that he is perfect love. Not that he loves, but that he actually *IS* love. And the virtue of charity brings us as close as is humanly possible to understanding the nature of God.

This love for mankind is just about the only quality of God that we can even begin to understand. We can have no real conception of what it is like to be all-powerful, all wise, all seeing and eternal, for example. But we can have an idea – albeit far less than perfect – of what it would be like to be LOVE. It's at least a concept we can contemplate without being intellectually overwhelmed.

What's more, practicing charity is the only way for us genuinely to demonstrate our love for God. It is easy enough to say we love God. After all, he really doesn't ask very much of us. The Ten Commandments aren't all that onerous when one thinks about it. Most of us have no real interest in murder, adultery or theft or telling untruths about our neighbors . . . Well, most of the time anyway.

God doesn't borrow money from us and forget to pay us back. He doesn't write us parking tickets. He doesn't try to jump the line when we are

waiting to get served at the bank. He doesn't make rude gestures to us on the Beltway, and he doesn't let his dog dig holes in our yard. What's more, he doesn't have political opinions that are different from ours – at least not that he's letting on.

People, on the other hand, do all of the above and very much more, which is why it so difficult to feel anything less than extreme irritation with so many of them. And this, in turn, is why our efforts at trying genuinely to feel loving towards them is so pleasing to God. In fact, one might describe it as the only acceptable sacrifice we can make to him.

What's more, this business of loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves has a practical aspect to it. Every time we put it into practice, it makes the world a better place. Charity, in fact, is our best means of advancing God's kingdom here on earth. If we sincerely want to realize God's promise of peace on earth and good will towards men, we need to take I Corinthians 13 to heart and translate it into our lives.

The only hearts and minds we can be absolutely certain of changing – even with God's help – are our own. After all, we are the only individuals over whom we can hope to exercise any real direct control. Before we can hope to transform other people's hearts and minds we must first transform our own.

If every single Christian were to implement St. Paul's teachings on charity at the same instant – if they were simply to start loving the people around them as they love themselves – our land would indeed become a place of peace and goodwill to all.

The remarkable, transforming power of Christian love enables Paul to assert so confidently: "Now abideth faith, hope and charity – these three. But the greatest of these is charity. *AMEN*."

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN