

Above all, love each other deeply

(Song of Songs Chapter 2 & 1 Peter 4: 7-14)

When I was about nineteen I left school and went to Westminster College to train to be a teacher. One of my two chosen 'main' subjects was English and the Head of that department was one Dr Oxley. Dr Oxley was a larger than life character with a striking appearance. He was a broad, thickset man with a flushed complexion and with prominent features. A pair of spectacles over which he glowered at his students was the final intimidating touch. Dr Oxley was an aggressively proud Yorkshireman who had two particular loathings. The first was for 'southerners' which probably included everyone south of Sheffield. He also professed a marked dislike for Lancastrians, and although like most Liverpoolians I had never regarded myself as a Lancashire lad, in Dr Oxley's eyes I too had the misfortune to hail from the wrong side of the Pennines.

I always attended Dr Oxley's classes with some trepidation knowing that at least once in every lecture he would fix me with a triumphant grin and say, "Well, Jacob, do you know the answer to that, then?" guessing quite correctly in most cases, that I did not have a clue.

But there was one occasion when I did get the upper hand. Dr Oxley claimed that before he went to bed each night he read a passage from the New Testament in its original Greek and one afternoon, just before commencing his lecture, he recited a lengthy passage entirely from memory. As he had intended, we were amazed impressed. Then we realized this performance was not for our enlightenment or edification, but to remind us, as if we needed it, of our own woeful ignorance. Glowering at his unfortunate students he said, "I don't suppose any of you ignoramus know what that's all about," then fixing me with a confrontational glare, "do you, Jacob?" On this occasion I met his gaze confidently and said, "I think, Dr Oxley, that is St Paul's treatise on love that can be found in his first letter to the church at Corinth. Chapter 13, I believe."

Dr Oxley was momentarily speechless... and then the rest of the class applauded. There is a verse in Genesis that comes to mind, "And blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand..."

Of course, I was as ignorant of New Testament Greek then as I am now, but I had been able to pick out one word that was repeated time and time again. That word was 'agape' and from the deep recesses of my memory came a few scraps of a sermon I'd heard years ago by a Methodist Lay Preacher on the difference between the two Greek words for 'love': 'eros' and 'agape'. 'Eros', of course, is the word for sexual love or desire from which we get the word

'erotic', and 'agape' is the word for benevolence or charity, for self sacrificing love.

The passage in question, by the way, is one that you will know well, you will probably have heard it at most weddings. It begins, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

Eros and Agape. Well, we've had both of those in the passages of scripture we've heard this evening. First of all the 'eros' of the 'Song of Songs'. The subject of the Song of Songs, sexual love, is certainly timeless, and it consists of a collection of erotic poems in which a woman and her lover exchange intimate details about their relationship. Here are a few of the verses from passage we heard this evening, the words of the woman, the *beloved*:

Sustain me with raisins,
refresh me with apples;
for I am faint with love.
O that his left hand were under my head,
and that his right hand embraced me!
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the wild does:
do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready!"

Throughout the ages many readers of the Song of Songs, both Jewish and Christian, have been alarmed by its frankness and have preferred to think of it as a symbolic writing, representing the relationship between God and the people of Israel, or between Christ and the church. But such ideas were certainly not in the minds of those who first included it in the Hebrew Bible. For them, God was the creator of all things, including sex and relationships, and a collection of love poems was therefore no more out of place than the story of God's dealings with Israel in the great events of their national history.

Let's leave the Song of Songs for a moment and turn to the reading from the first of the two letters attributed to Peter that we heard this evening. It begins with, "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self controlled so that you can pray."

In the nineteen sixties Roger McGough, one of the so called 'Liverpool Poets', wrote a poem called 'At Lunchtime'. It was considered rather risqué at the time but now youngsters probably study it for GCSE English Literature. The theme of the poem is that in age of the atomic bomb the world could end at any time, at lunchtime, in fact. In the poem the possibility of imminent annihilation encourages all the passengers on Roger McGough's bus to throw off caution, along with most of their clothing, and behave in a rather libertine fashion.

In the first century, Christians believed that Christ's return was imminent and the 'end of the world was nigh'. Perhaps that's why they found it easier to pool all their possessions and to dispose of their assets for the benefit of the poor than perhaps we do today, but they were constantly being warned by the likes of Paul and by Peter not to fall prey to the temptations envisaged by Mr McGough.

On the contrary, they were exhorted to love each other deeply, not in the 'eros' sense, but with 'agape'. The writer of 1 Peter gives some examples of what loving each other deeply means, acts such as offering hospitality without grumbling. Tragically there have been many people recently who, because of the flooding in many parts of the country, have been called upon to offer hospitality and accommodation to friends and relatives, and indeed, perhaps to strangers, and I'm sure they have done so without grumbling.

Loving others deeply, says the writer of 1 Peter, means that Christians should use their gifts to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. "Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ."

Let's return for a moment to the Song of Songs. Cast your mind back to the first time, or should I say perhaps, the first times, that you fell in love. Can you remember how you used to sit around, mooning about his or her eyes, hair, smile, figure... Remember the loss of appetite, the palpitations every time you thought of your beloved... the ecstasy whenever he or she came into the room, the agony if ever he or she was late in case you'd been stood up, and it was all over...

In essence, whether the relationship was to last for the next sixty or seventy years or only until next Tuesday, while love had you well and truly in its grip, nothing else mattered, everything else took second place.

It's not always like that with the 'agape' kind of love, is it? It doesn't come quite so naturally to us to show consistently the benevolence, the self sacrifice, the altruism demanded of the Gospel. Peter gives us a clue about what is expected of us when he talks of hospitality and his general remarks about 'serving others', but if you want the definitive list of requirements then I can do no better than to refer you to that passage quoted by my old English tutor.

"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."

Do you know we could almost use this a checklist, if only we had the presence of mind, or indeed, the time, to check them all before opening our mouths, putting pen to paper, or leaping into action.

"Love is patient." "Patience is a virtue," says the old proverb, but perhaps not a virtue that is much admired these days. Is it just a sign of my increasing age or is there really less tolerance, less forbearance than you used to be able to expect from most people?

Writing in the Times last Friday Catherine Riley recounted the following incident while driving with her young son in London.

"Turning right out of a junction at traffic lights, I edged forward because there was a young female learner in a Red Driving School car stranded in the middle of the main road trying to turn right into my road. But because her lights were red, she had decided to wait in the middle of the road. I motioned for her – no hooting, no irritation – to complete the turn because she was way beyond the lights and had blocked the junction. My three-year-old and I did not even break from our singing until she then started giving me nonHighway Code hand signals and a mouthful of abuse."

Certainly the young learner driver here would have been able to tick few of the boxes, but perhaps we might be generous and account for her lack of manners by her being under some stress and before we condemn her behaviour perhaps we ought give some thought to our own actions and motives on occasions. We are all human: not one of us is perfect. I am sure that at the beginning of every act of worship when we make our confession and ask for God's forgiveness we can all recall occasions when we have been less than kind, when we've been short tempered, or when we've wanted our own way. I know I always can.

Someone said to me recently that we could be facing 'crunch time' at Llanfrechfa. I think what was meant was that while some folk are dismayed by some of the recent changes in mission, ministry and worship, there are others who genuinely feel that at last things are on the move, and they thank God for it! Perhaps, if ever there was a time for all of us to remember Paul's treatise on love, it is now: Love is patient; love is kind; it does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful... it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

And the words of Peter..."Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

(Based on a sermon preached by Ken Jacob at Evensong on 29th July 2007)