**Sermon – St Valentine’s Day - All Saints Online, 14 Feb 2021**

**1 Corinthians 13: 1- 13 St Valentine’s Day**

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|  | One of the consolations of our continuing lockdown is the opportunity it affords for my children to hone their culinary skills, and I readily admit I am the willing recipient of their efforts. This week was no exception when they made Valentine Day cookies. |

Mine broke into pieces however, a timely reminder that this Sunday should be as much for the broken-hearted as those who hearts may full of romance. Everyone has heard of St Valentine, but few know his story and in fact there are varying stories about what he did. He does not appear in the Bible and probably lived sometime after AD 200 (CE200). Many stories feature him being asked to pray for a jailkeeper’s daughter, who was seriously ill. When she recovered the jailkeeper decided to release all the Christian prisoners as a result, Christians at the time being persecuted for their faith. Other stories feature St Valentine regularly officiating at the marriages of Christian couples, common practice today but at the time forbidden by the Romans. He is said to have cut hearts from parchment to remind the newlyweds of their marriage vows, a tradition adapted in our modern times as Valentine Day cards. Most stories about Valentine conclude with him being arrested for these Christian practices and brought before the Roman Emperor Claudius II, who offered him a simple choice – disclaim his faith or die. Unwilling to renounce his faith in Christ, Claudius ordered Valentine’s execution and he died as a martyr, probably in AD269 (269CE). St Valentine would have been familiar with today’s reading from 1 Corinthians 13, because it concerns what he lived his life and gave his life for: Love. It is a reading frequently chosen for weddings and whilst nearly 2000 years old, I want to draw out three points that have meaning for us today:

V1 says ‘*If I speak in the tonguesof men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal*.’ Imagine you’ve gone to see and hear an orchestra play at the Royal Albert Hall in London. But when you get there, the orchestra is just one guy playing the cymbal! On its own the sound is brash and discordant, but set in its true place it can be part of a beautiful symphony. So what about speaking in tongues of men or angels? What the Bible is saying here is that you can have all the persuasive eloquence of the most gifted politician or orator, but if love as your motivation is absent, then the words you speak are like a cymbal missing an orchestra. There is something more powerful, beautiful and timeless than words or prose or music, and that is the love which inspires them.

On to V2: **‘***If I ….can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge…but do not have love, I am nothing.*’ What might this mean to us today? This verse circumscribes a warning about pursuing knowledge at the expense of love. If I accumulate great knowledge and learning, achieve even a Nobel prize perhaps but fail to find the love who gave us the ability to gather knowledge and reason in the first place, then it’s like I’ve reached the finish line only to find I was competing in the wrong race.

V3 tells us ‘If I give all I possess to the poor…..that I may boast,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2013&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28669b)] but do not have love, I gain nothing.’ In our humanity we are still tempted to take the credit for things that we have not done, and where we have done good works, to shout loudly about them – a little like when we see someone giving a supersize cheque to a charity on TV. It is perhaps not the charitable cause being loved but rather the publicity. At a time when the internet has enabled so many to achieve fame and recognition, v3 suggests that these can be a hollow crown, one that we could spent our days in pursuit of only to find we had missed the most precious treasure of all. The Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell once wrote: ‘*All that is needed is that men should not be so intoxicated by new power as to forget the truths that were familiar to every previous generation. Not all wisdom is new, nor is all folly out of date*.’

So is the ‘love’ that St Paul (who wrote this passage) exhorts us to seek out, and which was the basis for St Valentine’s faith, the romantic love that we celebrate on Valentine’s Day? v12 gives us the answer: ‘*For now we see only as in a glass darkly; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*’ There is good news for each of us in the final verses of this passage, whether we’re single or a couple, whether we’ve experienced love at its pinnacle or whether our experience has rendered us broken hearted. The Bible is reminding us that romantic love isn’t just all there is be celebrated on Valentine’s Day – it remains at best a pale reflection of its truer form, like looking at something in a mirror that has imperfections on its surface. There is a love that we can be confident in, a love that will never let us down, a love that we could spend a lifetime yearning for but overlook in our pursuit of learning, accomplishment, recognition or romance. We find it described in v4-v7: ‘*Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, nor is it self-seeking. It is not easily angered, and keeps no record of wrongs; it does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres*.’

This love can’t be bought, but it doesn’t cost a penny to receive. We could be the most eloquently persuasive politician, the most gifted scientist or philosopher, we could find fame and fortune and whilst these things aren’t bad in themselves without the knowledge of God’s love they remain just an empty pursuit, like a cymbal playing without an orchestra or a night sky without stars. It is the all forgiving, unconditional, all encompassing, redeeming, restoring and life-giving love that extends to us freely from God our heavenly Father through his son Christ Jesus. And it is just a prayer away. Amen.