

WOMEN IN FELLOWSHIP

MYSTERIES NOW REVEALED



6TH OCTOBER 2021

READING

I CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

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. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,^{*} but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁴⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly,^{*} but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.



It's a great joy to be here with you today and to share a little of your conference with you. When Ann contacted me and told me the theme of your conference and the topics which were to be spoken about I thought it sounded wonderful. She asked me to choose the scripture passage for this evening's service and to do a short talk on the theme of the conference. The first thing that went through my mind, and made me smile, was the word 'short' – simply because that depends on the church tradition one comes from. For some of us short is 5-6 minutes for but for other short is 20 minutes! I've opted for about the middle of those two and I hope that's OK.

The second thing was that I had the whole of scripture from which to choose my reading. I wonder if you know the story of the child who proudly proclaimed: “Yes, I know all about the bible, everything from Generations to Revolutions with Spasms in the middle!” Well, I had all of that scope from which to choose.

You may think the book of Revelation might be a good place to start, given the subject matter, but honestly that book has been the subject of the greatest head scratching and debates in the whole of the bible and would, imho, be more aptly called 'The Mysteries of St John the Divine' than the Revelation to St John the Divine so I couldn't start there.

I quickly decided however, that this beautiful and powerful passage from 1 Corinthians would be my chosen text, partly because of verses 1-5 and 11-13 and partly because of its subject matter. Perhaps the most widely known passage of scripture after the 23^r Psalm, it rarely preaching on (and neither is 23^r Psalm come to think of it). Read at weddings all over the Anglican Communion every year, this beautiful passage tells a great deal about mysteries revealed – and mysteries not revealed.

In the opening verses of the passage, the apostle Paul speaks to us of all things that we might, if we were the most powerful and knowledgeable person in the world, be able to do. These verses are a good example of what in theological terms we call 'hagiographic hyperbole', in other words, exaggeration in scripture to make a point memorable. Because no-one but God and possibly know all mysteries and have all knowledge. Sometimes in our world today I think there are people who believe they do though. There are those who scoff at those of us with faith because they think science has already given us all the answers to life, the universe and everything. And if hasn't already, then it certainly will in the future. And it certainly has given us a great deal hasn't it?

Some of the topics you are hearing about in the conference are examples – the mysteries of the mummies solved by archaeology and scientific study, the Enigma code solved by maths and logic. I remember watching a fascinating film not long ago about the discovery of DNA and its use in forensic science. I had no idea that it was so recent a discovery – and particularly its use in forensics which only dates back to the 1980s. We are continually discovering new things – new mysteries being revealed.

The bible itself is a progressive revelation of God and God's love for all of creation, including us fallible and fragile human beings, and of course, the clearest and most wonderful revelation of God was in the person of Jesus, God incarnate, 'love come down' to use the words of a popular Christmas carol. And that's why I chose 1 Corinthians 13 as the scripture for this service. In this beautiful passage we hear the apostle Paul telling us that love is the most important thing in the world – it is the clearest and best revelation of God we will ever have.

That's why the bible tells us that people will know we are Christians by our love - not correct doctrine, not moral behaviour, not always being right, not that we attend church, or the particular church we attend. While those things may be good and of some importance, none of them are what marks us out as followers of Jesus. Only love does that.

God's revelation didn't end with Jesus or with the book of Revelation. It continues on, through science, through art, through nature (which is why the wonderful hymn 'How Great Thou Art' was my choice for this evening's service), through all of life – and most of all through love. In every tree, in every flower, in every animal, in every person, in every mystery revealed, we see the love of God incarnated, made material, made tangible in some way. But nevertheless, as Paul says at the end of this passage, still 'we see in a glass dimly'. Because ultimately, God is still mystery. We cannot ever fully know God. Too many years ago, when I did my first degree at Chester College which was part of Liverpool University at the time, one of my Divinity lecturers said something really powerful and I've never forgotten it. He said, "We can never comprehend God, we only ever apprehend God". At the time, as a young Christian I thought it was a bit woolly to be honest. I thought I already all the answers – oh the confidence of youth!

But over the years, as God has surprised me in so many amazing ways, blowing the lids off my nice little theological and doctrinal boxes, that lecturer's words have come back to me. Over and over I remember that God is mystery and what I see while here on this side of the veil is only a shadow and part of the fullness of God – I see in a glass darkly, but one day I will see face to face and all will be clear. I find this a great comfort, especially when things happen that I just don't understand: so many of the evils in the world, so much suffering, so many bad things happening to good people, Christians and non-Christians alike; so many evil people prospering; family and friends taken from us before their time – and we've seen too much of that in the past year. In all of this I remember that I see through a glass darkly and not until I stand with God in glory will I understand.

Again, too many years ago, I heard a preacher give a lovely analogy of this passage. He talked about a small boy looking through a hole that had been made by one of the knots of wood falling out of a fence. He could see through that hole to the vista beyond, but it was a limited view, a limited revelation of what had hitherto been a mystery to him. Someone older and taller, who could look over the top of the fence would see and know a great deal more. And that's how it is with God. We can see only a small part – God sees everything.

We have finite view, God has an infinite and eternal view and things look very different from that view.

So, for now, we continue to grow as much as we can in love – because through the eyes of love we may not be able to see everything, but we will see much more of what God sees, in the way God sees it. In meantime our faith and our hope tell us that, in the face everything we don't understand, one day, as Mother Julian of Norwich said so beautifully: “all shall be well, and shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” And we can say that with confidence because we know that God, infinite mystery is also infinite love – and when other things pass away, when other things seems incomprehensible, when other things fail, nevertheless: 'faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love’.

Amen.