

What's love got to do with it? - 30 Jan 2022.

'There'll be no strings to bind your hands, not if my love can't bind your heart.'

These are the opening words of the song, 'Angel of the morning', sung by Juice Newton. If you listen to it all the way through you will find it a bitter-sweet story of a one-night stand that could have possibly been so much more.

Sometimes I feel as though our relationship with Jesus is a bit like that; he doesn't bind us - he asks us to be with him, and sometimes we ourselves have the one-night stand response. When we need him, we use him - then we walk away.

Since our topics this morning have so much to do with love, I listened to another song about love by Tina Turner called, 'What's love got to do with it?'. If you listen to the words of that song, the answer is 'really?...nothing'.

There must be more songs written about love than any other topic in the world, which indicates not only how important a part it plays in our lives, but also how we get muddled up by it, and fail to understand its power and its depth.

Paul's description of love - rather feebly rendered as 'charity' in the King James Version, which, when you look it up in a dictionary, defines it somewhat limply, in my

opinion, as 'an archaic description of love of humankind.'

That is certainly not the implication of the Greek word 'agape' that is being translated. The inference of 'agape' is of self-giving and self-sacrifice - a total emptying of one's own interests in the effort to do everything one can for another.

So neither the KJV nor the NIV is particularly effective at giving the word 'agape' its true meaning. That is why it is so helpful to have 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 available to us, to help us to really understand what is being said here.

Perhaps one of the first things that I notice when reading Paul's description of love is that

nowhere does he mention feelings or emotion. Yet that is what we tend to think of first when we talk of loving someone or being in love.

Science can show that our dogs love us in the same way we love them and our children - by the release of the so-called 'love hormone', oxytocin, from the posterior pituitary gland. Does that make you feel any better or give you a warm glow - to know that you are the stimulus that produces a neurochemical reaction in your pooches' brain - or more worryingly, perhaps, in your devoted partner?

On a more practical note, when I was doing my obstetric training, we used to give an injection

of oxytocin to the mother just after the birth of the baby, to help the uterus contract and expel the placenta - but you had to get the timing just right, or the uterus would contract with the placenta still inside - not a good plan. The injection also had another beneficial effect - that of promoting milk let-down, to enable the baby to suckle immediately and thus bond quickly with the mother.

This milk let-down reaction to endogenous (self-produced) oxytocin is so pronounced in some women that the mere sight or even smell of their baby is enough to start their milk ducts ejecting milk, in some cases with embarrassing results.

However, moving away from applied physiology, Paul's description of love has no such physiological element in it, and no emotion is required for the expression of the type of love that he is writing about.

Paul, throughout his epistles - to CS Lewis' way of thinking - describes four types of love that the Greeks of his day recognized. If you wish to go into more depth, you can find at least seven types of love in ancient Greek culture, but the further subdivisions smack of trichodichotomy or hair-splitting. The four types accepted by Lewis are, 'Eros, Philos, Storge, and Agape; briefly, these are erotic

love, love between friends, family love, and unconditional, self-giving love.

I don't wish to go into any detail with any of these yet, except to say that the original Greek - insofar as we think we have it - has the word 'agape' for each instance that Paul uses the word 'love' in this passage.

If we look closer still, we can see that each one of the qualities that Paul mentions that seem desirable in terms of gifts, requires an act of will. It doesn't just 'happen' like a conditioned neuro-hormonal reflex. To speak in tongues, to be able to prophesy, to have encyclopaedic knowledge, enormous discernment, unlimited faith, bottomless

generosity - none of these is worth diddlysquat without love - agape. You may impress your fellows with your cleverness or erudition, but you won't impress God, who sees what is on our hearts and determines our intent, our motive, the true desire behind the apparent gift.

If my gift doesn't in some way benefit you or another - of what value is it...really? If I could play an instrument and the music soothed your soul, then that would be a real gift - but if I gave you \$100 or told you that I had the faith that would make your debts disappear - that wouldn't really mean much, would it?

The motive, the intent behind my gift has to be 'agape' - or it is worthless.

Only once we understand that does Paul go on to elucidate the attributes of this 'agape', this true love. Again, please note that each of these requires a decision of the will, a clear intent to demonstrate humility, patience, trust, hope, perseverance - and so on.

So perhaps we have to be very careful how and when and where and in what context we use the word 'love'.

Imagine Douglas, for instance, questioning a defendant in the dock in court, and asking a man accused of wife-beating what his

relationship with his wife was; the defendant answers that he 'loves' his wife. Now Douglas can ask in what way he loves his wife, and how is that demonstrated in practice.

All of a sudden the hollowness of the claim to love is made apparent when compared to even just one of the qualities outlined in Paul's description - and underlined even more heavily when added to Paul's injunction to men to 'love your wives as Christ loved the church' (Eph 5:25).

This can only be 'agape' - because Jesus gave all for us - not just a bit, but everything.

I am going to suggest to you an idea which you may not agree with, and if that's the case - well, frankly my dear...

I suggest that all four of the loves that Lewis recognized are on a sort of linear intensity spectrum.

If we start with Eros - physical, sexual love; that is the most basic and also the most selfish kind of love - the kind of love so often sung about. 'I want you, I need you, I can't live with out you...' It is all about fulfilling my needs. Once I have had my fill of you - I'm out of here.

Move on to Philos; the friendship, the companionship, the valued colleague or golfing

buddy; the neighbour in your knitting circle. Here there is more time and care given to the other person; birthdays are remembered, you might even visit them in hospital. They matter to you.

Storge is familial love - that of parent for child and of child for its parent; of siblings for one another. Here the value is much higher; you share things, you know that your sister likes this part of the roast, so you give it to her, even though you would rather have it yourself. If you needed a kidney transplant, your brother would give it to you. You are another step up the sacrificial ladder, where the other person matters to you at least as much as you do to yourself.

Finally, we get to Agape, where it is all about the other person or persons. Here is where the giving doesn't stop. Here is where we see someone jump into a raging river to save another - whether he can swim or not; here is where we see the stranger run into traffic to save a wandering child who is lost and in danger; here is where we see the person step forward to admit to a crime they didn't commit to save the retributive slaughter of a village by Nazis or similar perpetrators of gratuitous violence; here is where we see one man beaten beyond recognition and nailed to a piece of wood to take the blame for wrongs he never committed.

This is the ultimate zenith of love for others - there is nothing of self here; that jug has been emptied out for you and me.

My suggestion is that as we travel through our lives, if we listen to the whispers of our hearts, we are gently being led up that ladder to self-sacrifice, to give in the way that Paul meant - and Jesus showed.

We probably all started at Eros - some may still be stuck there; but for those who aren't, then the path ahead is still beckoning. It may not ask the ultimate sacrifice as it did for Jesus, and for many others - but then again, it just might.