

Sermon Hosea 11 1-9 and 1 Corinthians 12 27-13 13

The New Testament reading we have heard this evening is one of the most famous passages in the Bible. It is learned by heart, printed on cards and posters and is often chosen by those who are marrying but it is about a deeper love than that which the newlyweds may well be considering. Once the first flush of love, if it is indeed true love, is softened then the greater meaning that this passage is talking about will be able to show through. Once the lust abates then the true love that will last will be part of their lives together. But as with now over 50% of marriages that willingness to love more deeply and more longingly does not seem to be able to win through. Who ever marries a perfect husband who is absolutely everything that the other would wish for – well if that is you then all the better for you - but surely love is also being prepared to live with the other person's foibles and they with yours. Prepared to give and to take but prepared also to stand up for what is right and speak out for what is wrong even if it means a 'bit of a domestic'.

Our Old testament writer, Hosea, certainly knew the tough side of that love. The whole of this Book of prophecy is about love but the tough part is that his own

marriage to Gomer is not an easy one. Gomer is unfaithful and continues to be unfaithful (though of course we only know about Hosea. Gomer is unable to give her side of the story). But Hosea's situation can also serve as a parallel to how Israel (though he refers to them as Ephraim it means the same as Israel) it serves as a parallel to the way the Israel is treating God. So how is Israel treating God at that time? Hosea still loves his wife and wishes her to return to him and love him faithfully as he loves her. Similarly, God loves Israel and wishes Israel to return to Him and be faithful to Him. God, like any couple marrying, promised to love them for all time; but He made a covenant with Israel and never broke that promise. The word used in Greek for the love that God shows to His people is 'agape' – it is a love that is selfless and generous; a love poured out on His people whether they deserve it or not. We have different meanings of this precious word 'love' it encompasses a wide range of meaning – 'Oh I love your dress' does not have the same meaning as the love of a person; it's intensity is not the same but love whether it is from God or man is an earnest and anxious desire for and an active and beneficent interest in the well-being of the one loved or of others.

For the half of those people marrying making their promises of love that seems to fade into darkness as they grow further apart maybe their love is more concerned with the self and not the whole.

But God's love is for ever.

When or if you have children and watch them grow; when you nurture them, feed them, clothe them, put plasters on the bits that hurt - your love of them grows deeper. You love your children with all your heart – you might not like sometimes what they do or what they say but you love the person. God loved His people, Israel as a parent loves their child but did not like what they were doing with their lives. All the way from Egypt onwards and despite all that He had done for them Israel has rejected God's love; they do not deserve His mercy but God does not turn His back on them. They were prepared to return to their old ways of worshipping their old gods when they could not get their own way and have what they wanted when they wanted it and they wanted it – now! He might love them but they did need to grow up and stop being so childish.

Paul, when he was encouraging the new Church in Corinth, may well be quoting from an existing poem. He

was encouraging the newly formed Church to stop being so obsessed with their spiritual gifts and that they were in danger of in fact losing their love. He can see that they are impatient, unkind, jealous and boastful – all qualities that we can see in the developing adolescent who wants all perfect and here and now. Paul finds them boastful, proud, rude and quick to lose their temper yet slow to forgive and put aside their differences. This passage is not one of love but that living that way will lead to an absence of love. He is urging them to rediscover their love and make it the most important gift of all. He talks of loving as a child – how he talked like a child, thought like a child and reasoned like a child but then when he became a man he put those childish ways behind him. He talks about the perfect and the imperfect – very much like our lives; he talks about how life here is imperfect but we will experience perfection once we meet with God at our passing. So, we, as adults need to accept that imperfect life. We cannot have everything we want when we want it and we want it now.

Paul talks about the resounding gong and the clanging cymbal – those empty vessels that make the most noise; those that shout out rather than putting a damper on noise for a deeper more resonant note. It is the way of

life; the perfection wanted in life is a pipe dream and the sooner we grow up and realise that that is the way of life then the happier we will be. Hedonism is the child's way of seeing life as it really is. With over 40 years of marriage I can safely say that for me life and love is feeling comfortable being in my man's company and not feeling it necessary to talk. We know what the other is thinking; speaking, mind sharing – no it is just being comfortable in each other's company and sharing what life throws at us – and it will and it does!