

## **Rom 12.9-13: WARM AND WELCOMING**

Chelmsford 11/1/09

Did you hear about the church which was gothic in architecture, arctic in temperature, and where the deacons used to walk up and down the aisles like polar bears?

Sadly, some churches can be cold and unfriendly places.

But in being so, they run counter to the intention of their founder.

For Jesus calls us to love one another.

Indeed, he calls us to love one another as he has loved us. He said to his disciples: **“I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, you must also love one another”** (John 13.34). The key-defining mark of the church is love.

A church by definition should be a community of people who love one another as Jesus has loved them.

This morning I want us to explore what it means to love one another in the light of what Paul has to say in Romans 12.

Last Sunday we began our series on the values we have set ourselves as a church by looking at Rom 12.2: **“Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind”**. This led us to our first value statement: *“We want to be a community which is transforming lives and changing culture”*.

Today I want us to look at what Paul has to say about love in Rom 12.9-13, and to link that with our second value statement: viz *“We want to be a community which is warm and welcoming”*.

**“Love must be completely sincere.... Love one another warmly as Christian brothers and sisters, and be eager to show respect for one another.... Open your homes to strangers”**.

### **1. YOURS IN CHRIST**

The first thing Paul has to say is that the love we show one another must be the kind of love that Jesus showed us.

When we write letters to one another, we must be able to sign them **“Yours in Christ”**.

In the Greek language there were many words for love.

- There was the love of lovers – *eros* from which we get our word erotic love
- There was the love of friends – *philia*, from which the name ‘Philadelphia’ is derived, the city of brotherly love
- There is also the word for self-giving love – *agape* – which Christians took and used of the love of God for us. It is this word ‘agape’ which Paul uses in Rom 12.9 of our relationships with one another.

Up until this point in his letter to the Romans, whenever Paul has used the word *agape*, he has always used it of the love of God for us in Jesus.

[Warm and welcoming]

- 5.5: “**God has poured out his love into our hearts by means of his Holy Spirit**”
- 5.8: “**God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us**”
- 8.35, 39: “**Who can separate us from the love of Christ?.... There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord**”

But now Paul uses *agape* of the kind of love that we should have for one another.

“**So then, my brothers and sisters, because of God’s great mercy to us I appeal to you: .... Love**”.

In the light of “**God’s great mercy to us**” in Jesus, we should love one another.

The love which we will be celebrating at the Lord’s Table is the kind of love we should have one for the other.

It is costly, self-giving love. As we say when we welcome people into church membership, it is the kind of love which involves standing by one another, come hell or high water, whatever the cost.

When we write to one another, we should be able to sign off “***Yours in Christ***”.

We are there for one another because of the love that Christ has had for us.

It is his love which we wish to show to one another.

## 2. YOURS SINCERELY

Secondly, our love for one another must be “*genuine*” (NRSV) – it must be “**completely sincere**” (12.9 GNB). In the words of Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, “*Love from the centre of who you are; don’t fake it*”.

When we write to one another, we should be able to sign off not just ‘Yours in Christ’, but also ‘***Yours sincerely***’.

Literally, Paul says: love must be “*without hypocrisy*” (anupokritos).

In classical Greek a ‘hypocrite’ (the Greek word is ‘*hupocrites*’) was an actor. Actors in those days used to hold masks in front of their faces as they acted out their part - the mask would enable them to pretend to be something which they weren’t.

Indeed, I’m told that masks are still used today in Chinese opera.

But Paul says: ‘Away with masks’, ‘Away with ‘make-believe’.

When it comes to loving one another, there is no room for play-acting.

You must really love one another, just as Jesus really loved us.

At the end of this morning’s service we will bind hands together as a sign of our unity in Christ and say the Grace as a prayer for one another.

Let’s make sure that when we do so, we really mean it. If you don’t mean it, then don’t hold hands – keep them stuck in your pockets rather than engage in hypocrisy.

[Warm and welcoming]

In the Christian church there is no room for false smiles and false words. **“Love must be completely sincere”**.

But, somebody might object, how can I be sincere in my love for another person, if I don't find them very attractive? How can I love a person, if I don't really like the person?

But that question presumes that to love is to like – that may be true of love between lovers, or love between friends – that that is not true of the kind of love Jesus had for us.

Jesus loved us not because he was attracted to us, but simply because we are..

I'm not sure that God actually liked us before he began to love us – after all, our lives were blighted by sin and rebellion.

To love is to want the very best for the other – it is to give our very best for one another.

It is to act as if we really did like one another. And as we begin to act in a loving way, time and again we find that we do begin to love one another.

### 3. YOURS WARMLY

**“Love one another warmly as Christian brothers & sisters” (12.10)**

Literally Paul says *“love one another with the kind of brotherly and sisterly love that you would find within a family”*.

We have already mentioned that the Greeks had a number of words for love: in addition to *agape* love, there was *eros*-love, and *philia* love.

There was also ‘*storge*’ love – love experienced within the family.

It's that word which Paul uses here

**“Love one another warmly as Christian brothers and sisters” (GNB)**

**“Love one another with mutual affection” (NRSV)**

**“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love” (NIV).**

Peterson misses the mark when he translates: *“Be good friends who love deeply”*, because this isn't friendship love – but family love - the kind of love you find between a brother & a sister. In the words of William Barclay: *“The Christian church is not a collection of acquaintances; it is not even a gathering of friends; it is a family in God”*.

This makes all the difference in the world. We may pick & choose our friends, but we cannot pick our brothers & sisters.

What is true in natural world is also true in spiritual world.

God has given us one another: we have therefore a duty to love one another - yes, even Brother So-&-So who rubs us up the wrong way; even Sister So-&-So whose sentimentality we cannot stand.

How are we to love one another? Paul gives one example: **“Be eager to show respect to one another”** – or as the NRSV puts it: **“Outdo one another in showing honour”**.

Peterson: *“Practice playing second fiddle”*

To quote Barclay again: *“More than half the trouble that arises in churches concerns rights & privileges, places & prestige. Someone has not been given his/her place; someone has been neglected or not thanked; someone has been given a more prominent*

[Warm and welcoming]

*place than someone else"*

The fact is that Christians have no rights - only duties. Our duty is to love one another - to "**outdo one another in showing honour**" (NRSV).

This does not mean that we tell white lies about one another. It would not be helpful, for instance, for one of the fabric team to sing the praises of my DIY skills. It would actually be another form of hypocrisy. Rather we need to seek out and honour whatever good qualities the other possesses: Yes, we need to "**be eager to show respect for one another**".

In other words, we should be able to sign our letters not just "Yours in Christ" or "Yours sincerely", but also "*Yours warmly*".

#### 4. YOURS WELCOMINGLY

"**Open your homes to strangers**" (12.13). Or in the words of NRSV: "*extend hospitality to one another*". NIV: "practice hospitality".

In the NT hospitality is not a gift for some to exercise, but a duty for all to fulfil. Hospitality is not about lavish parties or extravagant dinners – that's entertainment. It's about opening our doors to one another – it's about inviting people home. Yes, it may involve a meal, but it could just as well involve a cup of coffee. The essence of hospitality is simply opening the door, and say '*Do come in*'. It doesn't need money – it needs an open door.

But it is more than just an open door.

It involves too *an open heart* – an open heart in the sense that the door is open to all. Here in Rom 12.13 Paul writes: "**Open your home to STRANGERS**".

In 12.10 he talks about loving one another warmly as brothers and sisters, but here in v13 he speaks about loving the stranger.

Hospitality is not about entertaining friends. Hospitality is about welcoming strangers. It is about welcoming people we do not know

There is a third element which characterizes true Christian hospitality

It is opportunistic, in the sense that it constantly it looks for opportunities to welcome people home. Literally Paul writes: "**Pursue hospitality**" like a hunter pursues his prey.

- In the words of one commentator: "*Go out and look for those to whom one can show hospitality*" (Cranfield).
- Or as Origen, the great theologian of Alexandria who lived at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century & the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century: "*We are not just to receive the stranger when he comes to us, but actually to enquire after, and look carefully for, strangers, to pursue them and search them out everywhere*".

I.e. we are to be enthusiastic opportunists – looking for any excuse to welcome people into our home. Indeed, according to Peterson, we should "*be inventive in hospitality*"..

*[Warm and welcoming]*

As a church we are pretty good at greeting one another – it is almost impossible for anybody to come to our church without being recognized and welcomed. But the welcome needs to go deeper. We need to welcome people back to our homes. That's what hospitality is all about.

Let me encourage you to become intentional about welcoming people home. Life is so busy for so many of us that we can't necessarily open our home every week. But what about once a month? Or even just once a term? To encourage people to open up their homes, I have designated Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> February as 'Hospitality Sunday'. Wouldn't it be great if on that Sunday everybody in our church were to invite somebody home for lunch, for tea, for coffee after the evening service.

We need to be able to sign our letters not just "Yours in Christ", or "Yours sincerely" or even "Yours warmly", but also "**Yours welcomingly**".

To return to our value statement with which we began. We have said: "If we are to fulfil our mission, then people around us need to see that we are genuinely committed to Jesus". It is in that context that "*We want to be a community which is warm and welcoming*". Let's do our best to put that value statement into action!