

Sermon preached by Mr. D.G. Crowter on Sunday morning
12th November 1989 at Gower Street Memorial Chapel

Text: "Charity (or love) never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things".
1 Corinthians 13. v.8-11.

We have noticed that in this chapter the inspired apostle first declares that love is essential; because whatever gifts we may have, or whatever deeds we may do, or whatever sacrifices we may make - it is all nothing without this love of Christ in our hearts.

Then he writes of the excellencies of that love; how that it is the antithesis of, and the antidote for, all that is evil; and how it is the quintessence of all that is good. Then he says that love really enters into every other grace - into faith and hope and patience; love is an essential ingredient, so to speak, of every other grace. And it endures all things; it will outlast all the trials, and difficulties, and perplexities, and circumstances of life. It "endureth all things".

And now here the apostle takes a big step further and says that it never fails. Not only will it last through life, but it will last all through eternity. It is an everlasting love. Other things pass away. They have their place, but then they are finished with. But not so this love. It will never fail. Once you possess it, you will always have it. Through all the ages of eternity, it will 'know no change, save only to increase'.

And so, my dear friends, we all need to face this great question. The apostle does not write as though it were enough for him to hear about love; or enough to think about it; or enough to admire it; or enough to sing about it. All those things are good in their place. But he says, "Although I do these things and have not love, it profiteth me nothing." It is no good unless you actually have it. And that is the great question: "Do you have this love of Christ in your heart?" You may not feel it very strongly at this particular time; but is there really that principle of love within you? Because otherwise you are missing the greatest of all blessings and favours. And it is of such everlasting importance. O do face that question now: do you have this love? The apostle certainly did. He said that if he did not have it, everything that he did, everything that he said, would all be nothing. But it is very evident that this apostle did have it. And some of us, through the mercy of God, do have it. And O how I do desire that everyone of us may have this love!

The subject then here is Everlasting Love. Now those words are normally expressed concerning the love of God Himself. We think of His everlasting love, because the

infinite God is the Source of this love, and the Supplier of it. It is all from Him, and it is all of Him. And thus we often think of His own everlasting love. But this love that the apostle is speaking of is the love of God in the hearts of men. And he says that this also is everlasting, because it is Divine love. I am sure that those words are very true:

"If once the love of Christ we feel
Upon our hearts impressed,
The mark of that celestial seal
Can never be erased."

We are marked with it for ever. It leaves its impression; and it is still there. I remember when I was a lad of sixteen, and the love of God was so conveyed to my heart that really for some months it was such a reality, such a wonder, and such a joy, that I could never possibly forget those months of my life; nor many other occasions since, when, through the mercy of God, this love has been known. Now Jesus said, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life." He has a life within which nothing can possibly bring to an end. It is everlasting in its nature, because it is the life of God in the soul of man. And this life is the life of love. It is a life from which love will certainly spring, and therefore it will continue to do so. Everlasting life means everlasting love. Now do you have that?

The apostle here expresses this in two particular ways. And first he writes in a way of CONTRAST. He is saying that love never faileth; but whether there be prophecies, or tongues, or knowledge, they shall come to an end. Now this very beautiful and short chapter, of course, comes between two much longer chapters which are particularly about spiritual gifts. We must understand these things in that context. In the early Church there were prophecies. There were those who had a special gift of prophecy. And that could be very useful. The prophet Agabus, for instance, foretold that there would be a famine in Judea; so other Christians were able to collect and send for the relief of those Christians in Judea. That was very useful at the time. But once the famine was over, it was of no value at all. There was not really anything spiritual or lasting about it. And so with tongues and with knowledge. The knowledge that the apostle refers to is clearly that special knowledge which was given to some with regard to particular matters in the early Church. It is not that saving knowledge, but knowledge of ordinary things like those prophecies. So the apostle Paul was told by that prophet Agabus that he was to be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem. Agabus took that girdle of Paul's from him, and bound his own hands and feet and said, "Thus said the Holy Ghost, thus shall the Jews bind the man that owneth this girdle and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles" And so the Christians knew what was going to happen; they were told it beforehand. They had this special knowledge given. But that was no use afterwards. Once that event had taken place, then the value of it had all disappeared. Again it was nothing of a spiritual nature or of lasting value. So the apostle here says that love, in contrast with these spiritual gifts, is lasting; it is everlasting. Its value does not disappear in the course of time.

Now the apostle uses different words to express this. First he says that love

never faileth. The word that he used there means to 'fall off'. You know that at at this time of the year leaves are falling off the trees. They have been alive, living on the trees, but the time comes when they fall off. They are separated from the branches, and they decay, and die away, and they are finished with. The apostle says that love never does that. Once love is there in the heart it will never die away; it will never desert you. Some of you, of course, may at times be tempted to think that it might do. Your love may seem to be withering away. It may seem to be like a leaf ready to drop off and die. But if it is this love it never can do, because of the nature of it. It does not depend upon you. I have often felt those lines of the hymn very moving:

"O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul on Thee."

It is wonderful, so wonderful, to be embraced by a love that will not let you go because it is an everlasting love.

Now the apostle uses a different word with regard to prophecies and knowledge. This word really means 'to be abolished', or 'to become idle'; to have served its purpose, and to become therefore, so to speak, unemployed. We might say that in these last few days the Berlin wall has appeared to become like that. After being there all these years suddenly it seems no longer necessary. The authorities seem to have decided that it has served its purpose (whatever that was) and now it is really finished. And so it is being pulled down. Now that is what the apostle says with regard to prophecies and knowledge; they they, after a time, will have served their purpose. And when the full canon of scripture was completed, when the early Church was brought out of its infancy and was established, there was therefore no need for these special gifts. And so they passed away. They were no longer of value or use. Of course that is a matter of historical fact. Only the apostles had the ability to convey these spiritual gifts to others; and when the apostles had served their course in life, then there was no one else to impart these spiritual gifts, nor were they necessary after the apostolic age.

The apostle uses a different word with regard to tongues. He says 'they shall cease'. That word is used in the gospels regarding the stilling of the storm on the lake by Jesus. When Jesus arose, and stood on that boat, and said to the wind and the waves, "Peace, be still", they ceased and there was a great calm. The storm at once stopped. That particular storm was finished; it had come to a sudden end. I remember a minister once describing what the original word means in this way. He said that he and his family were once driving along the motorway, and suddenly the car began to make some loud and alarming noises. So much so that they had to pull onto the hard shoulder, get out of the car, and scramble up the bank, because they were afraid that it might explode or catch fire. Now the trouble proved to be a very serious one, and so that car was finished. It went to that particular point but was never driven again. It came to a sudden and complete stop. And that is what the apostle says concerning tongues. And if we hear in these days (as you are bound to do) that many, like some of the Corinthian believers, make such a lot of tongues and of healing powers and so on, then remember what the apostle says plainly with regard to these things. He said the tongues should cease;

that is, the God-given gift of tongues should come to a sudden end. But love never; love never faileth. It has its most blessed and wonderful use all through the age of the Church and all through eternity. It is of everlasting value. Paul could not possibly conceive of love coming to an end. Nor is it in the least possible, because it is Divine love. It is the love that God gives, and therefore it is so exceedingly precious and of such enduring character. O what wonderful love this is! We can do without tongues, and even healing gifts, and so on. But O we cannot do without love! Without it we would be absolutely destitute of the very heart and soul of all godliness, of all true religion. Do you have this love?

And then in the second aspect here, we see that this is seen in its COMPLETION. First there is the contrast to other gifts, and then here there is the completeness of love. The apostle says, "We know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part will be done away." There was an incompleteness about those early gifts that God gave to the believers in the churches, with regard to those matters of prophecy. They were very limited in their importance and in their scope. There were only certain things which were known, which were revealed; the vast majority were not. Knowledge and prophecy and also tongues (although the apostle does not mention them as such) had great limitations. But love is of a very different character; it has eternity in it. There is a completeness about it. Of course that love is incomplete in its present quantity; in the love that we have (if we do indeed have that love). It may be incomplete in its present measure, but there is a completeness about it with regard to its character. And it will be finally perfected.

Now the apostle uses an example to illustrate this - the example of being a child, and of childish things. Now you who are young have your toys to play with. You have those things which belong to your present age. In our loft at home we have a large box full of toy cars, and also childrens' books, and dolls, which used to be in constant demand. But they are not in use at all at the moment, because our children have all grown up and they do not want to play with toy cars, or to have dolls. And you children have your toys to play with. But if you were to come in and find your father playing with the toy cars or your mother looking after the dolls, you would think that was very strange. Whatever would have happened? But they have put away these things now; they do not need them any longer, as you would have them and use them.

And, dear friends, really those who make so much of tongues in our day, are like children who have never grown up. They do not seem to appreciate the immense, the immeasurable value of this love; that it is so much greater than these gifts that had their important place in the early Church, but are not needed in our present day. But love is so different. Love never faileth. It is going to be absolutely complete. You can never grow out of love. You are never too big or too old to be interested and concerned about this love. It is not something about which you can say at some point, "Well, I really think I know enough about that", or "I have experienced enough of this love, I do not need any more." You could never, never think like that; but rather exactly the opposite. You grow into this love. You long more and more to know and to experience it,

and to know it in all its complete fulness in the everlasting ages. Love is so different. There is eternity in it. And there is such a completeness about it. But it is not something that you can put away, or have finished with. It is really more and more precious, and more and more wonderful, the more that you know of it, because it is an infinite love. We can never know it all. It should be our desire to know more and more of this love.

There is something especially on my mind to say to you this morning. Not something especially new, but especially important, and especially solemn. As most of you know, this is the fourth Lord's Day that we have been considering this wonderful subject of the love of Christ in the hearts of His people. Only the Lord really knows, but it may be that this is the last day we shall be considering this chapter at present. And will that be the end of it? Will it be the end of it, the last of it, for you? Will you be content that this has now been passed over and set aside in the past? I think I can truly say that it cannot be so with me - that the effect this passage and the one in Ephesians chapter III have had on me during these last weeks is such that I could never be the same again. But how is it with you?

I have two very different feelings in my heart with regard to this matter. There is a thought which I can hardly bear - which is that after all some of you might not know this wonderful love. Now if you do not know the love of God in your life, then you must go to everlasting misery, where this love can never, never be known. If you do not know the love of Christ in this life, you will certainly go to hell. And that is a place where no love is found at all; it is a place of intense, bitter hatred. Everyone there hates everyone else, and will for ever hate them. Jesus said, concerning that terrible place, "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And the way that is expressed means there shall be always, for all eternity, weeping, which is a sign of great sorrow, and gnashing of teeth, which is a sign of great anger and great hatred. You may remember how, when the Jews were about to stone Stephen, they gnasned on him with their teeth. They were so angry with him. He was so holy. And he had showed them exactly what the situation was with regard to them and they just could not stand it. They gnashed on him with their teeth. It showed anger, arising out of intense hatred. That was a bit of hell let loose. Dear friends, in everlasting misery there will be everlasting hatred - no love whatsoever. Love in this world, in various ways, alleviates the sufferings in this life. In this world love and hatred are mixed; but they are going to be separated. In heaven there will be perfect love; in hell there will be perfect hatred. And if you should go to that place of endless misery, then the devil and all his angels will be there. And they will torment you with all the hatred that they have, because that is why Satan would like to get you to hell - so that he can torment your soul for all eternity.

But before us here in this word there is something that is in such complete contrast - the love of Christ; that wonderful love that is so revealed in His life and in His death. It is so set before us in the gospel. "God commendeth His love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And if any of you should say, "Well, what shall we do to escape the justice due?"; the apostle Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every

one of you for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" O I do want you to feel like this - "I just cannot bear not to know this love - this wonderful, this vital love of Christ. Whatever else I may miss, whatever I may lose, it does not matter as long as I do possess this love of God in my heart." And the apostle adds these words at the beginning of the next chapter; "Follow after love." - "pursue it with all your heart". Because if you do feel like that, and if you really do pursue this love, you may be sure that you will attain to it. God does so freely give that love to those who really want to know it.

I said I had another thought in my heart, which is very different, so very different. That is, that there are those of us here who have been so united together in the love of Christ that we know that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. I'm thinking somewhat of that word that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. He says, "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye, in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For ye are our glory and joy." And how it does rejoice my heart to know of a certainty that some of you to whom I have preached the love of Christ in my little way will most certainly be there in that day. We shall be together because the Lord has bound, has knit our hearts together in this wonderful love. I can understand a little (although I cannot go along with it entirely) what was written from Rutherford's deathbed sayings, concerning that church at Anwoth where he had ministered and so spoken to them of the love and the loveliness of Christ:

"Fair Anwoth by the Solway,
To me thou still art dear!
E'en from the verge of heaven
I drop for thee a tear.
Oh! if one soul from Anwoth
Meet me at God's right hand,
My heaven will be two heavens
In Immanuel's Land."

My heaven is Christ Himself: I cannot see how that heaven can be increased; but even so I can understand what a joy it must have been to that godly man to realise this that there would be those from his own congregation who should meet him at God's right hand, and who would for ever enjoy the wonderful love of Christ throughout eternity.

And so, my dear friends, we come back to this great question: How can we know, and how can we have, this love of God within our hearts? There are two aspects to the answer.

First, love is of God. It must come from Him. It is all from Him. He is, so to speak, the infinite Ocean of Divine love. Every drop of love that is ever known in the hearts of men, every drop of this spiritual love, is from God. You cannot obtain it anywhere else, or from anyone else, but Him. God has shown His great love; He so "commendeth His love toward us in that when we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

And that love can only be known through Jesus Christ. That is where, in the Saviour's death, God has revealed the wonder of this love. There it is to be seen. Jesus Christ the crucified One - He is the great Channel of love. Love only flows through Him; and if you would love more, you must go to that cross, and cleave to that cross, and have

that cross constantly before you. If only we were more concerned with that contemplation of the Saviour's cross! If only we were to be there more, surely it would be otherwise with us.

"There, fastened to the rugged wood
By holy love's resistless chain,
And life deriving from Thy blood,
Never to wander wide again,
There may I bow my suppliant knee,
And own no other Lord but Thee."

And that love, the love of God through Jesus Christ, is conveyed by the Holy Spirit. It is all conveyed through Him. We read that "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts", is poured out into them, "by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." And we have that word in the 1st epistle to the Thessalonians; "Quench not the Spirit". He is as a holy Fire of love. And when He is really active in our hearts, then we shall feel something of the influence of that love. But His influence may be quenched by our coldness, and our sinfulness, and our waywardness, and our wilfulness. O quench not the Spirit, if you would know more of the love of God in Jesus Christ!

So love is of God; it must come from Him. And He is the great Giver of this love. It flows into the hearts of His people by the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit.

And then there is a second aspect of this question, How may we know the love of God? Or, how may we know more and more of this love? Well, God has provided in His great mercy and goodness means for knowing that love. In recent weeks, on Tuesday evenings, we have been considering communion with God, which is communion in love. And therefore those means which God has provided for communion with Him are means whereby we may know more of His love, and experience it - the Word of God; prayer and praise; the ordinances of the Lord's house; these are all means in which the love of God in Jesus Christ is known by His people.

First, there is reading the Word of God, and hearing it. Our late dear member, Mrs. Wadsworth, was once brought up quite sharply, and blessed really in the end, by hearing a minister say (it may well have been in this chapel), "If you do not read the Word of God, it is no wonder if your heart is cold." It is no use complaining about having a cold heart if you do not read the Scriptures where the love of God is so revealed. But it is not enough that we should quickly read a passage; we need to read prayerfully, and perhaps slowly, and to consider what we read, to meditate upon it; for often that brings the greatest benefit. I shall always remember preaching to you last year from the Gospel according to John and how, especially in the last few chapters, it seemed that every page that I turned showed some new aspect of the love of Christ. There it was to be seen. "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end." All His teaching with His disciples, His comforting them, warning them, and instructing them - all was so full of love. And His prayer to His Father, His agony in Gethsemane and at the cross, the way that He appeared to Mary Magdalene, and to Peter and others - every aspect, every theme that we considered, it seemed so full of the Saviour's love. But, dear friends, we do need to meditate on these things. We need to pray over these things and to ponder over that love.

"On such love, my soul, still ponder,
Love so great, so rich, so free;
Say, whilst lost in holy wonder,
Why, O Lord, such love to me?"

O what profit there can be in meditating upon that love, the love so revealed in the Saviour's cross!.

"O the sweet wonders of that cross,
Where God the Saviour loved and died!
My noblest life my spirit draws
From His dear wounds and bleeding side."

This is the love which this chapter is all about.

And then there is prayer. Are you asking to know more of this love? In the weeks that have passed, have you really been asking the Lord to bless this subject and to show you more and more of the love of Christ, and to convey it more and more to your hearts? As I may have mentioned to you, for a good many weeks now it has been with me, and a good many nights - I mean in that prayer that we read in Ephesians III. And I have felt to know more of what was expressed in those lines of the hymn:

"I thirst, and faint, and die to prove,
The greatness of redeeming love,
The love of Christ to me."

In that passage in the Ephesians the apostle prays that that church to whom he wrote "might be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ might dwell in their hearts by faith; and that being rooted and grounded in love, they might be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge; that they might be filled with all the fulness of God." That is a great deal to ask - but it is not too much to ask. And the apostle goes on to say that God is "able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think." Again and again in those nights I have felt that I could not ask less than that for myself - to be filled with the love of Christ; and I could not ask less for you, each one of you, that you might "know the love of Christ, and might be filled with all the fulness of God" - that God who is love itself. O dear friends, do seek with all your hearts to know more and more of this love of Christ which passeth knowledge - this sweet, wonderful, holy, heavenly love!

Amen.