

#### **EPIPHANY 4 C 30012022** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

##### *1 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. And 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. If 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 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When 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. For 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

Most people would be familiar with the reading we heard today from the first letter to the Corinthians: if you've ever been to a wedding in a church, chances are this was one of the readings. As a hymn of praise to love, it stands alone and is beautiful and meaningful, so no wonder couples choose it as a lovely expression of the love they share.

However, if you read the rest of the letter and see this chapter in the context of the whole, it takes on another level of meaning. St Paul was writing to the church in Corinth, which was one of the churches he established as he travelled around the Mediterranean telling people the good news about Jesus.

Paul had heard that things were going a bit pear-shaped in the church at Corinth, and his letter contains some hard words. He told them that he was horrified to hear that they were going off the rails so quickly and in so many ways.

When you read the letter you will see all the complaints that Paul addressed: people were not sharing food with other church members who had none, they were having arguments and disagreements and even suing one another, there was sexual impropriety, and they were arguing about spiritual gifts.

It seems the Corinthians thought they were pretty good Christians and extremely spiritual. They had begun to believe they were better than other people because of the gifts God had given them. They had lost sight of the things Jesus taught about humility; and they were confused about what it means to love one another.

Paul loved the people of the church in Corinth; that's why he took the trouble to write them a long letter and took the risk of being hard on them. He really wanted them to learn to love God and one another and to keep their focus on Jesus and his teaching.

It takes courage to tell people things you know they don't want to hear. It's easier to keep quiet and not risk offending people- or worse. But Paul knew he didn't have the option of minding his own business, because the Christians in Corinth **were** his business.

We heard this morning about the young Jeremiah being called to be a prophet. He had to convey God's word to his people, and to say they didn't like it would be an understatement. They treated him terribly.

Jesus, when he spoke to the people of his hometown, also told them things they didn't like. It was all well and good at first, but once he told them that he was not going to be their own pet miracle-worker but had come for the benefit of everyone- even the despised Gentiles- they were outraged and wanted to kill him. Jesus told all kinds of people things they didn't want to hear during his short life, and eventually- perhaps inevitably- it got him crucified. Some didn't want to hear that being rich could be a barrier between them and God; they didn't like being advised to give away their possessions. Some didn't like hearing that God loves 'sinners' and forgives those they thought were beyond forgiveness. Others didn't want to hear that the way they did religion was not going to guarantee them a place in heaven.

It is never easy to be told that you are wrong, and even harder to be told that what you firmly believed was right is actually not right. None of us enjoys criticism, and if the criticism induces a feeling of shame, we are likely to be distressed and probably angry.

I wonder how the people felt, when they sat together in Corinth on the day Paul's letter was read aloud to them. I imagine some were squirming in their seats; perhaps some walked out.

Hopefully, some took Paul's letter in the spirit in which it was intended, as loving advice, corrective teaching, and a much-needed reminder of what is central to the faith.

The letters we have in our Bible, the epistles, talk a lot about growing into maturity and having an adult faith. In this letter, Paul makes it clear that the people of Corinth needed to grow up, stop bickering and learn to be adult people of God.

Prophets have the unenviable task of speaking truth that others will not want to hear. Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, and countless others have suffered because they would not be polite or keep quiet when they could see injustice, corruption, and oppression happening around them.

Who are today's prophets? It depends who you ask and which side of the fence you might be on. Some are advocates, giving voice to people who too often are voiceless and powerless: I think of Rosie Batty and Grace Tame, and hope that this year Dylan Alcott will be a voice for people living with disability.

Some point to the future and ask us to make changes before it's too late: I think of Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough.

What do we, people of the parish of Carine-Duncraig in the year 2022, **need** to hear but perhaps don't **want** to hear? If St Paul came to visit us, went away and wrote us a letter, I wonder- what would he write? What do you think?

Your mission this week- should you choose to accept it- is to wonder what Paul might say to us here at St Nic's if he visited. Imagine what he might see and hear; ponder about what he might praise, and what he would criticise.

If you like, you can share your thoughts with me, or someone else of your choice. It's up to you.

God wants the best for us, and the best for us is to learn to love God back, to love God's creation and to love God's people.

Because God loves humanity, God sent prophets like Jeremiah to warn people who were going off the rails and heading for disaster. Sometimes people listened: mostly they didn't, and punished the poor prophets instead. Then God sent Jesus, and again some people listened but most didn't. Shooting the messenger is still common practice.

God still speaks to us today, and we need to ask our questions and listen- even or especially when we don't like the answers. Love rejoices in the truth- and love never ends.

The Lord be with you.