

Last Sunday evening, 30th May 2010, as we continued our sharing in the good news revealed in Ephesians we came to the section where Paul tells the church that he is praying for them. I keep asking, he says, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. And, he continues, I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you know – and then he lists three things he is praying for them to know:

the hope to which God has called them;
the fact that they are God's glorious inheritance and
God's incomparably great power – the power that is greater than any other power, the power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

And we asked ourselves why would it be important for Paul to pray for God's people to know hope? And we concluded that it is because hope changes lives. According to your hopes so you live. You hope the weather wont rain and so you plan, prepare, invite and organise a picnic. Millions of people hoping to win a fortune on the lottery buy tickets every week, not out off by the hopeless odds but encouraged by the fact that other people keep winning and so they hope, why not me? And in that hope they invest their money to buy, their time to go and buy and to check out the results and their dreams, speculating in what would I do if I won. Hope in smaller and bigger ways drives our lives. And hope, Paul tells us in 1Corinthians 13 is one of the 3 main Christian qualities: over and above all things, these three remain, faith, hope and love. And, as He goes on to say, the greatest of these is love. And however much our faith and our hope change our lives how much more should love.

Let me share a story with you, a sort of modern parable. There was a boy, and he was selling newspapers on a street corner, and it was a very cold winter. And the boy was cold and he was hungry and he was lonely. And when he'd sold as many papers as he was going to sell, he asked a policeman who was passing by if he knew anywhere that he could get some food and warmth and shelter, because he only lived in a cardboard box round the corner in that alleyway over there. And the policeman said to him, "You see that big house across the way there, go and knock on their door and say to them: 1st John 3:16. Have you got that: 1st John 3:16."

Well the boy was so hungry, so cold, so needy that he did what he was advised. He walked to the big house and knocked on the door and when it was opened and he was asked what he wanted, he said: 1st John 3:16. And they opened the door to him and let him in. When he got in the lady of the house said to him "would you like anything to eat?" and he said, "well just a little, I haven't eaten in 2 days." So the lady took him into the kitchen full of wonderful food where he ate and ate until he couldn't eat anymore. And then he sat there and said to himself: "1st John 3:16 I sure don't understand it, but it sure makes a hungry boy feel full." Then the lady took

him upstairs to a huge bath tub filled with warm water, and he got into it and soaked in it for a while and as he did he thought to himself 1st John 3:16, I still don't understand it but it sure makes a poor boy feel clean. Then the lady took him to bedroom and tucked him in a warm bed and kissed him goodnight and as he lay there in the bed he could hear a rain storm lashing against the windows, and as he lay there he thought, 1st John 3:16 I don't understand it but it sure makes a tired boy feel rested. The next morning she took him down to the same big table full of breakfast food and he ate again. Then she took him to sit in a big chair in front of an open fire and this time she sat down with him, with a bible in her hand and she asked the boy, do you understand 1st John 3:16? And he said, no, I doubt, the first time I heard it was when the policeman said to use it. So she opened the Bible at the first letter of John, chapter 3 verse 16 and she began to tell him about Jesus and right there in front of that fireplace the boy gave his heart and life to Jesus. And then he sat there and thought 1st John 3:16 I still don't fully understand it, but it sure makes a lost boy feel safe.

But of course 1st John 3:16 says "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." Sometimes we who are Christians forget what we have, and what it really means that God loves us. Let's turn to 1st John 4:12-21, page 1227. Dear friends, John writes, No one has ever seen God; but if we love another, God lives in us and His love is made complete. There are two startling statements, God's love is perfected by His living in us. God who is love completes His love by living in us. Many commentators struggle to accept what this scripture says but that doesn't stop it saying it: God's love which originates entirely in Himself, and was made into a human being in Jesus Christ is brought to perfection in us. How? By being reproduced in us or among us in the Christian fellowship.

That's the second startling statement. The first is that if we love one another God lives in us. God is love and when we love one another God lives in us. When God created people, He walked with them and talked with them but He didn't live within them. God had a direct personal relationship with us but we broke it off by our sin, trying to be like God. By the time of Exodus God commanded Israel to make a sanctuary so that He could dwell amongst His people. God's dwelling place was a tabernacle, a tent. And when it was dedicated, as we read in Exodus 40, God came down and His glory filled the tent. God was in His tabernacle in the midst of His people. But He wasn't in them. And the day came when the people sinned and as we can read in 1st Samuel, God's glory departed.

However God used Samuel and David to restore the people and Solomon built a stone temple for God. And when the temple was dedicated, the glory of God came and filled the Temple. But again Israel sinned and Ezekiel saw the glory of God depart from the temple and the temple was destroyed and the people exiled. After the exile the people built a new temple, and

later Herod completely re-built that temple but did the glory of God ever return to his temple? Yes, in the person and presence of Jesus Christ. John tells us in the opening words of his gospel, the word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the One and Only. But we crucified the glory of God. We took the glory of God and we rejected Him and killed Him. How would you respond to people who took your son and beat him up, and spat on him and fabricated false charges against him and killed him? How would you treat people who claimed to be his best friends but in his hour of need deserted him to save them-selves? This is what God did. He raised Jesus from the dead and then Jesus ascended into heaven not to pour out God's wrath upon us but to pour out His Holy Spirit upon us; not to give us the death we deserved but the life we didn't deserve. God the Holy Spirit came to live among us – inside & in the midst of us. This is what happened at Pentecost. This is what happens when we become Christians. Our bodies are members of Christ Himself, a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God

And the first application of all this is worship, not simply as a personal event but as a collective, corporate, fellowship togetherness, we are as Peter says in his first letter: living stones, being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, so we may declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light. Worship is the first expression of our love of God, but our worship counts for nothing if it is not also a genuine and true engagement in fellowship love. We are all of us sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ, which makes us all family, new family in which all the distinctions that the world would make between us have no place or value, for in the church there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus, as the current phrase goes, we are all in it together.

More spiritually the communion which we share with Christ as we eat the bread and drink the wine is also a communion of our fellowship for as Paul says in 1Corinthians 10:17: because there is one loaf, by which he means Jesus not the physical bread we, who are many, are one body for we all partake of the one loaf. Worship is a togetherness event. We all need to be saved and to know how to live so we join our minds in listening to God's living word, and as we sing we join our voices together to share in praising God; and as we pray we join our hearts to our Father's heart and as we offer tithes and offerings we join our wealth to share in God's Kingdom work. There is no place in the church for a purely private pew worship, me and my seat and you in your seat and otherwise we never meet. If we love God whom you have not seen then we must love our brother, whom you have seen; and if we don't love your brother then frankly John says, you don't love God. Our vertical love for God must express itself in horizontal love for each other. The early church shows us that we are to meet together for teaching, and for mutual support, as well as for worship. Do we

not do this in our natural families? Now as Christians we are members of a new family, and what applies to our natural families is it not to apply even more to our spiritual family? And this love for one another is the planting ground in our hearts for the love of others. How each of can do this is something we need to think about and discuss but that we must in some way do something is simply for our acceptance.

But there may be something that stops us getting involved in more deeply loving each other. And that may be other people. There's a bit in all of us which is like the school teacher who says what a wonderful school we could have if it wasn't for the children. Perhaps there's a bit of us that thinks what a wonderful church we could have without these people or even used to have before these people came along and made everything different. But if we do think that or even something like it then all we've done is measure out to ourselves the great need we have for love, to know God more, to become less and less ourselves and more and more loving like God for our love of God engages us in a triangle of love. the harder we find it to love each other the more we need to ask God to love Him for we will find then that as we come closer to Him so we come closer to each other.

But there may be another reason why we find it difficult to engage with others in fellowship teaching and mutual supporting: fear. When John speaks of love, he doesn't contrast it with hate, but with fear. Fear like hope guides your living, but unlike hope it leads you into inaction, and into death – the complete and final state of inaction. Fear stops you doing things. When you think you might have a picnic fear says why bother it's only going to rain. When you are asked to get involved fear says, I cant do it. When you are asked to pray aloud, fear says I cant, I can never think of what to say. Fear says, you don't count, you have too much to do, you can't get involved. Fear is a product of our being human, even Jesus in Gethsemane was tempted to give in to fears, asking His Father for another way, than dying on the cross. But His fear was less than His knowledge of His Father's love for Him, thus He could say, not my will be done, but Yours.

There is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear. Joyce Meyer said something that's really helpful about this verse, when she first read it she thought it meant that I'll stop being afraid when I have perfect love, so I must become perfect in love. But that misunderstands – even Jesus as a human being was beset by fears. No, what John is saying is that God's perfect love for us has the power to drive out our fears. As we grasp God's love for us so the power in which Jesus trusted when He went to the cross for us, the power that raised Him from the dead, can equip us to stop being afraid, to step out into building fellowship with others and to reach out beyond ourselves and offer God's love to others, that God might also live in them.