

You're lovely and you're not the only one

worship led by Dave Kitchen

It's good to be able to share this service with you, which I did originally on Zoom. And I want to bring a good friend along with me – Auntie Peggy. Later on, we'll get to Peggy and to a birthday party that nearly didn't happen but let's start with a poem that I wrote in the middle of these difficult times..

We live between the stars and the dirt;
A little of both sticks to us.
On our best days, we share the sky's reflected light,
Sparkle, dance and embrace all that life can mean.

But we also stand in the dust of this world
And some of it stays with us.
How could it not?
Tiny grains of doubt come between us and those we love.

We trudge through the mud of work we never thought would fall to us.
Sometimes the weight of everything absorbs our uncertain strength,
Makes us feel the light has gone out.

But we live between the dirt and the stars
So, however long the clouds linger,
We know that one evening soon the stars will light the heavens
And we will turn to dance again

Singing the Faith: 477 Teach me to dance

Let us pray

Father God,
Whose power is beyond our imaginings, whose breath gives life to all that is beautiful,
Root in our hearts a love for you and nurture it, we pray, so that it grows into a love for the whole of
your creation, help us to see all that is wonderful
And reject the lure of anything which might cause damage to that wonder.
These are tough times, Lord, so help us, now especially, to hold on to all that is good.
Through Jesus Christ, your son, for whom every day and every person is special. Amen

Reading: The bible reading comes from a man who volunteered to work in a Greek city and got very little appreciation for his hard work from many of the people he helped. So he sends a letter to them to try and sort out matters. It doesn't do the job and sadly it hasn't survived. We know about it because he ends up writing again. Now this man has a reputation for being rather blunt and to the point but after explaining very clearly that everyone needs to know their place, the letter turns unexpectedly in a different direction. After all the frustrations and the firm words, suddenly, poetry pours out of him. And here it is.

If I can speak with the tongues of men and of angels but have no love, I have become like the noise of a bell or the clash of a cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries, all knowledge; if I have enough faith to remove mountains but I do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give all I have to feed the poor and if I sacrifice my own body to be burnt but have no love, I gain nothing at all.

Love is patient and is kind. It does not envy, it does not parade itself, it is not puffed up. Love is never rude; it is never self-seeking. It is not easily angered and it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

And love never fails.

Where there are prophecies, they will end; where there are tongues, they will cease; Where there is knowledge, it will vanish away. What we know now, we know in part. What we prophesy now, we prophesy in part. But when what is perfect finally appears, then what is imperfect will pass away.

When I was a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child. When I grew up, I put away childish ideas. Now we see but a shadowy reflection, then we will see face to face. Then I shall know him even as he knows me.

Only these three things will remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13 – just about the most gorgeous bit of the whole bible. But there's one thing here we don't talk about very much and that is the fact that this extraordinary and beautiful love poem didn't work. We know that because I Corinthians is followed by 2 Corinthians. To be fair, some people got the message but many didn't respond as Paul must have hoped they would.

And that's the thing with love. You may give it and then not receive it in return. You can also receive it and refuse to give it yourself. There are no guarantees in this world with love. The bible actually makes space for a whole book about these matters – it's the Song of Songs, a series of erotic poems probably used as part of the week-long marriage celebrations that the Jewish people went in for. None of that 40 minute service followed by a buffet and a disco for them!

People use Song of Songs to parallel erotic love with God's love and Christ's love which is quite daring if you follow it through ... although very few preachers do! But firstly the book holds up a mirror to how **we** love. And one of the striking things is how little the young woman in the poems values herself.

She says:

I know I am not pale and elegant
Like the young women of the city.
But I long for you to tell me I am beautiful too.

He replies:

My love, you are lovely:
The way you walk is enough to turn heads.
Your hair curls into golden rings
And your eyes are as soft as a dove.

She's not convinced:

But I am not one of those fine ladies,
I'm like the wild rose that struggles
To grow where our sheep graze.

He replies:

The valley is more beautiful than the city,
In spite of all the sophisticated women,
You are the rose among the thorns.

One of our problems with love is not just giving or receiving it but feeling that we even deserve it in the first place. We know our imperfections and we home in on them. When BT installed better broadband at our place last month all I could see at first was how clear my wrinkles were. Somewhere along the line we all need to accept how we are. So let's pray together. Let us pray:

Lord of all that is good and lovely, help us as we wrestle with our imperfections.
If we look in the mirror we may be unimpressed by what we see staring back at us.
But the mirror is just looking at the surface.
There are things that matter far more than that.
Forgive us for the unlovely things we think and do; forgive us for our carelessness
And the times we've taken advantage of situations.
Renew us so that any imperfections are only in the way we look
And not in how we behave with each other. Amen

Singing the Faith: 416 There's a wideness in God's mercy

Prayers for others

Let's quietly remember those who are on our minds and in our hearts. Let us pray:

Lord Jesus

We think first of all of those we know who are more aware of their weaknesses and failures than they are about what they have to give. We remember them by name.

Silence

We think of those we love who we cannot be with at this time and ask you to fold your arms around them just as we would if only we could

Silence

We pray for those we know who have been in the front line during the last twelve months and remember them by name, too.

Silence

We think of those we know who are struggling with illness of any sort at this time, not just the one that gets the headlines. Be with them and those who care for them.

Silence

We think of those who have passed away this year and those who grieve, often alone because of the restrictions. Somehow, Lord, help them to feel less lonely and make us the people who do our best to stay in contact.

Silence

You see each person we have been thinking about, Lord, but you also see much more. So we trust you to care for those who we will never know as much as those who are closest to our hearts. And we long for a day when, across the world, we may hold each other's hands again and know we are one people. Through Jesus Christ who made the unlovely feel loved and makes the impossible seem possible. Amen

We remember the prayer you taught your first followers and say it now: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Singing the Faith: 81 Now thank we all our God

How we are held together

Thankfulness – we're not always great at it so it's good to pause and think of the loving mercies we've received in the last year as people have gone beyond the call of duty in hundreds of different ways. It ought to make us a little more confident in faith, hope and love. Like us, Paul somehow held on to those three things in spite of the troubles which life brought him.

Of course, the New Testament shows us that churches have not always been famous for their agreements, their willingness to be flexible and their appreciation of each other. But it's what love demands: that we show people they are valued. Part of our problem is that we often don't know people's circumstances. The two lovers in the Song of Songs are still learning how each other feels. They may want to spend both the night and the rest of their lives together but they've still got a lot to learn. And I guess that learning never ever ends. There are always things about each other that we simply don't appreciate as we might.

Which brings me to Aunt Peggy and the party that nearly didn't happen. Peggy was the youngest of six children born both sides of the First World War. Being the youngest, there were plenty of siblings to look after her but she had to follow rather than lead. And that set the tone for what was frankly a fairly unremarkable life.

In the Second World War, my dad drove tanks, Uncle Will was in the Radio Corps, the other sisters were newly married and bringing up families. That left Peggy who went to school, helped at home and, at 14, went to work at a light bulb factory: Osram in Wembley.

She did eventually marry but children never came along and later she looked after her mum/my gran until gran needed nursing care. Peggy was good company and kind but she was known, in essence, as the one who just got on with things.

So that's Peggy. The other bit of this story is the party. It was my dad's 90th. And it nearly didn't happen because dad kept refusing to go to it. He didn't want a fuss; he couldn't see the point of it. And, as he pointed out, rather grumpily, it was **his** 90th birthday not anyone else's.

My brother couldn't shift him even though he'd told him that there were people who would really, really like to celebrate it with him.

Dad told me all about this on the phone one evening, expecting that I'd side with him as I often did. Not this time though. I told him, in no uncertain terms, that it wasn't just for him, it was for the whole family.

"You told me often enough not to be selfish when I was growing up." I said. "Now it's your turn."

It's rotten being a parent when the very words you said are used in evidence against you. He huffed and puffed as he often did but he understood me. Cornered on his own moral high ground of five decades past, he gave way.

So a small party was planned. Now, when you're 90, there are not a lot of your own generation left for a celebration – in fact, there was only Auntie Peggy. But she made that day for dad: he'd always loved his little sister and hadn't seen her for ages.

Unsurprisingly, the talk turned to the past and, in particular, the Second World War. Dad had a surprise for Peggy about that part of their lives. He had uncovered what their older brother Will actually did. We'd always known he worked for the Army Radio Corps in London but also had to go away at times, rather mysteriously. What we hadn't known was that Will was working on the most secret thing of all – radar.

And not just working on it, he was the one doing all the checks before Captain John Cunningham flew the night-time test flights with each new version of the radar system. Will and Captain John became close friends. Not surprising as a night flight test pilot's life was in the hands of the person checking the valves and the wires.

Dad turned to his sister and said: "And all you got to do in the war, Peggy, was slave away making light bulbs."

There was a pause as if Peggy was weighing things up. I thought for a moment that dad had offended her.

Then she spoke: "I suppose it's all right to tell you now. I did make light bulbs for a few months but I was good with my hands so after a while or so they transferred me across to the Top Secret work."

This was news to all of us. Dad, in particular, looked quite taken aback: "Are you going to tell us what it was?"

She thought again. "It can't matter after all these years. I was actually making the first radar valves but I wasn't allowed to say. They won't lock me up for telling you, will they?"

As the only senior civil servant in the room, I promised her that she could rest easy on that score. So that's why the picture at the start is a light bulb but one that's shaped like an old-fashioned valve – the sort Peggy made.

Uncle Will, to his dying day, had never known that some of those valves so crucial to the testing he was doing came from his own little sister. No matter how clever Will was, he could do nothing without reliable valves.

So the baby of the family who often got taken a bit for granted was not just important, in this story, she was vital. If we don't learn that we will never love either ourselves or others as we should.

And it's why the bit in 1 Corinthians before Paul's poem on love is all about people taking their place in life and not treating anyone as if they're better or worse than anyone else. It's only together that we become one body. What happens in marriage physically is a microcosm of what happens in life if only we love one another and play our part.

If Peggy hadn't cared about her work and sent out badly-made valves, they would have gone to her own brother. If he hadn't spotted such a fault, the test pilot would have lost his night vision and probably his life – all of us belong to a chain that only holds us together well when we make it properly

We are not loved by God just so we can feel warm and welcomed; we are loved so we can love one another; we are saved so we can save one another. All we have to do then is to show it. Amen.

Singing the Faith: 440 Amazing grace

Blessing: Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honour everyone; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. **Amen**