

For many ministers the months from April to September provide plenty of opportunities to reflect and preach on Paul's iconic passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13 as it's usually the height of the wedding season. Not so with 2020 as many engaged couples had to either postpone their wedding until next year or completely rearrange their 'Big Day' to fit in with the current Covid-19 guidelines - Princess Beatrice included! However the PCI 'These Three Remain' initiative has provided us all with an opportunity to reflect upon the meaning and the implications of 1 Corinthians 13:13 – 'and now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'

These three remain – Faith

On Thursday 19 March we put up a sign on our 'wayside pulpit' advising that our church building was closed for the foreseeable future due to Covid-19. Along with this message we also put up the following words in larger print,

Have faith, do not fear!

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my righteous hand. Isaiah 41:10

During the months of lockdown and as restrictions gradually eased this verse provided me with much comfort as I faced many inner and outer fears. Wondering how I would pastorally support the sick, the dying and the bereaved without being able to be physically present with them as hospital chaplain or congregational minister. Having the courage to look into the lens of my camera phone and record talks and prayers to put online so that the flock God had given me to shepherd could be fed and refreshed each week in worship. Worrying about not seeing my family and whether or not any of us would get sick, or die from the coronavirus.

Throughout those months God was faithful and enabled me to face my fears, gave me courage for each day's tasks and provided his guidance and protection every step of the way.

Online services have enabled congregations to share in fellowship and worship together, albeit from our own homes, and they have also provided many others with an opportunity to engage with church and faith. My prayer is that our congregations will be much stronger as a result of these restrictions and that others will be drawn to reconnect with church and explore Christianity for themselves. Have faith, do not fear!

These three remain – Hope

If ever there was a symbol to represent lockdown it would be the rainbow. The bright cheerful colours of the rainbow gave us hope in the midst of the darkness of lockdown and provided a way for the nation to thank health and other key workers for their sacrificial commitment to keep us safe and well and provide for our daily needs. Windows, flower beds and painted stones were adorned with this cheerful symbol of hope.

Nevertheless, rainbows appears after the rain and for many lockdown was a time of deep sadness at the passing of a loved one, the inability to grieve in community, the stress and worry of potential and actual job losses and fears for the future of our world.

It is often in the darkest of times that we look to God for answers to our personal, corporate or world problems and when we do his light begins to shine through bringing hope for a brighter

day. During the last six months I have conducted seven funeral services and participated at another. Funerals are never easy but in the current situation they are so much more difficult. People often ask me “how can you keep on doing it” and, honestly, at times I’ve asked myself that same question.

The answer is Christian hope. The knowledge that in Christ sin and death and sorrow have been defeated and that those who place their hope in the Lord will not be disappointed. The certainty that a brighter day is yet to come and that the light of Christ will shine through even the darkest of days.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. Ephesians 1:18-19

These three remain – Love

One of the best things about lockdown was the love shown to neighbour, especially during those first three difficult months. It was heartening to see churches, communities and individuals respond to the needs of those around them. Telephone calls to the elderly and lonely, food and medicine delivered to those shielding and encouragement and care shown to neighbours near and far. For the Christian, love is the essence of who we are - people who demonstrate the love of God through our actions and our attitudes. This dreadful pandemic has given us opportunity to demonstrate that love in so many practical ways.

We love because God first loved us and God’s love is eternal. Sadly the same cannot be said for human love. Prior to the pandemic the #bekind was trending following the suicide of TV presenter Caroline Flack and during lockdown it seemed that that advice was being followed. Since lockdown eased however, we are gradually returning to our selfish, thoughtless critical ways, aren’t we? That shouldn’t cause us too much of a surprise due to the fickle, fallen nature of the human heart. Thankfully God’s love for us is not transient or dependent upon circumstances, but is perfect. His love is deep and abiding. God loves us so much that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. God loves us so much that he set eternity in our hearts. God loves us so much that he has made a way for us to live with him for eternity through faith in Christ, giving us bright hope for tomorrow.

One day our faith will be realised when we see God face to face. One day we will no longer have to hope for a better tomorrow. One day we will fully know and experience the eternal love of God. Until that day comes, let us be faithful to our faithful God, place our hope in the light of Christ and love God and our neighbours as we love ourselves.

These three remain... faith, hope and love.

The greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13