

Year C Epiphany 4

Jeremiah 1:4-10

1 Cor 13: 1-13

Luke 4: 21-30

Love can get us into trouble, lots of trouble, but at the same time it can also get us out of trouble, and we can see that in our readings today.

Jesus's love for the world got him into a lot of trouble in his home town of Nazareth, to the point whether his neighbours were ready to throw him off a cliff because he wouldn't do what they wanted.

Conversely, in our Corinthians reading Paul tells his listeners, who quite frankly seem to have been a pain in the backside, that love was their way out of all the problems they were experiencing.

And in our Jeremiah reading God's love for his very would-be nervous prophet – who by the way ended up being thrown into a well because he wouldn't stop banging on about God – prompted this encouragement: Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.'

Almost the only time I have heard God ever speak to me was here in St Mungo's almost five years ago. It was a few months before I started my training that led to my ordination, and I remember praying because I was feeling very daunted at what I was about to take on and had a real sense of imposter syndrome.

As I was praying God said very simply and very clearly, I am with you. I am with you. And those four short words have sustained me ever since as I am sure they sustained Jeremiah as well as countless others.

Jeremiah's plea that he is not qualified for the task echoes how most of us feel about a lot of things, isn't it? But God doesn't think like we do, which is precisely why He uses the humble, the nervous, the unqualified, the marginalised, in other words the very people we don't expect him to use, ie us.

But as far as God is concerned our limitations and failings are also the source of huge possibilities – something I will return to later when we look at 1

Corinthians. But the point is God often has more in store for us than we can imagine.

You may remember from last week's Gospel reading that Jesus had read that famous prophecy and then told them that that the Scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing, which is how this week's Gospel reading starts, and this week's reading continues and all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.

And then it all goes horribly wrong. What does Jesus do to offend them so much. Well there are two fundamental reasons, I would suggest – and both relate to the fact that Jesus' proclamation and subsequent words don't match their expectations.

The first is that he deliberately failed to complete the Isaiah prophecy namely the bit about God's vengeance on Israel's enemies. The long-time Israelite assumption was that God would pay back Israel's enemies for all the oppression and hardship they had inflicted on them down the centuries – and there was plenty to pay back for.

But not a word about that from Jesus – disappointment number one.

The second reason is perhaps more important. Jesus point blank refused to be a miracle man for his audience. They had all heard about what he had been up to but they wanted to see the same if not more.

After all, he was one of theirs, he was a Nazareth boy, so they wanted to see what he could do for them, right now. They were entitled to, weren't they? They hadn't made a fuss about his parents, they had helped him grow up.

Unfortunately for them, Jesus isn't big on entitlement – or rather if anyone is entitled, it is the marginalised and oppressed, the prisoners, the lame, the blind, not the good solid citizens of Nazareth.

God's love isn't confined to the chosen Israelites, he tells them, Look at Elijah – sent to help out the widow in Zarephath – or Elijah healing Naaman, a hated Syrian general. God is always looking beyond our boundaries, outside our community of faith. And we should be glad about that, because it means that God truly is the God of all, not just a favoured few.

But equally we need to make sure we are not like that synagogue congregation in Nazareth, that we want special favours, that we think Jesus is ours, that God will make right our past mistakes and disappointments and put us at the front of the queue when it comes to our future salvation.

The thing is God is not ours, nor is Jesus ours. We are God's, we are Jesus's. We need to work out for ourselves what it means for God to tell us what He wants us to do, rather than us tell him what we would like to do

Because actually perhaps the most important word in the Gospel reading is today. Jesus isn't that interested in either the past or the future. What interests him is what the widows, the prisoners, the oppressed, the abused, the starving, the homeless need today. And as we are now Jesus's hands and feet, what are going to do today to demonstrate that we are the living embodiment of how followers of Christ operate?

We know of course that Jesus so loved the world that he sacrificed himself on the cross for us, for everyone, and that what the Bible teaches above all is that God is love.

Which brings us neatly to our second reading, one of the most famous in the whole Bible. Much loved at weddings, I sometimes wonder how often the happy couples realise the context in which Paul wrote this letter.

This was not written to people in love reminding them to do their best to love each other through thick and thin. No, this was written to people who couldn't stand the sight of each other. Paul was writing to a church that was on the verge of self-destruction, telling it to get its act together before it was too late.

Paul has already spent the first 12 chapters criticising them for splitting into factions, for setting one teacher up against another, for taking each other to court, for those thinking they are superior to others because they speak in tongues, for sleeping with people they shouldn't be, for fighting over food and head coverings and much more besides, for the poor going hungry while the Eucharist descends into gluttony and drunkenness.

That's quite a charge sheet. As one commentator puts it, the Corinthian church is a church where all hell has broken loose. Piety, self-righteousness and spiritual one-upmanship may be on display, but the love that never ends most definitely is not.

Sadly, we have to recognise that all too often things haven't really got much better in the 21st century. Talking about the church generally, and not about St Mungo's, St James or any particular church or even denomination, do we really value love above everything else, above faith, above believing the right things, the style of the service, the quality of the preaching, having enough money.

Because love mustn't just outweigh the bad things in life, Paul tells us. It must outweigh everything, including all the good things.

And more importantly, love in Paul's terms, and indeed Jesus' terms, is not about feelings and emotions. It is something we actively do, actively make happen. It gets up and gets moving, it doesn't hang around waiting for warm feelings.

Paul has every right to slap down the Corinthians, because he knew what he was talking about. He had been one of them, he had approved of, and been actively involved in hatred, intolerance, violence and ultimately murder.

He only changed into a person for whom love mattered more than anything else when he himself encountered Love on the road to Damascus. Up until then he had thought of himself as a faithful believer and follower of God. But he had to be blinded by Love so that he could learn how to love and be loved – a lesson we all need to take on board.

So Paul knows what love can do, because he knows what love did to him. Of course, the love that never ends is Jesus, which is why there was hope for the Corinthian church two thousand years ago with its multitude of sins, just as there is hope for us today.

And that's important too, Paul uses the same triad of faith, hope and love in his first letter to the Thessalonians, but in that letter, he changes the running order places the final emphasis on hope, because that was the most important message that particular church needed to hear, just as the church in Corinth needed to hear about the primacy of love

Left to our own devices, we cannot love in the way Paul describes. We're just not capable of it. Like Paul, we have to hope that Jesus will love us into loving, that he will be love, in us, for us and through us.

That is the only way for Isaiah's prophecy will be fulfilled today, the only way we can help the captives to be set free, help the blind to see, and the poor to hear the good news.