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Romans 12:9–21

St John says '**God is love**'

And today St Paul is proclaiming to us Good News that this loving God,  
Who in Christ Jesus has forgiven our sins and drawn us to himself,  
That this loving God is giving us a way of life where we are free to share  
In the outward-focused and joy-filled life of love.

Listen to how St Paul begins today's reading: **Let love be genuine;**

First of all: What sort of love is St Paul talking about?

After all, in English we can say that we love ice cream, or our family,

Or our husband or wife, or the football

Or the third season of Downton Abbey or whatever.

Well, the word in Greek that is translated as 'love' here is 'agape',

And it's the sort of love that shows itself

In being willing to sacrifice what one has for the good of others.

So, in John 3:16, when it says '**For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son**'

This is the sort of love that St Paul has in mind.

But did you notice that St Paul says **Let love be genuine;**

Or, it could be more literally translated, **Let love be without hypocrisy?**

St Paul is about to picture for us what genuine love looks like

By giving us a string of practical applications in real life,

But he starts by attending to our attitude,

And he encourages us to see God, rather than other people,

As the true audience for our life of love.

Our Lord Jesus gives us this encouragement when,

In the Sermon on the Mount, he says this: **Beware of practising your piety before**

**others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.** Matthew 6:1

Here Jesus is particularly concerned with things

That show devotion to God: like almsgiving, fasting, and private prayer.

Jesus says that it is hypocritical, that it is not genuine but play acting,

If we do these things to win the approval of *human beings* –

We'll have a reward for our actions, but it won't be from God.

But if we do these things in secret, with no one but God watching,

Then Jesus assures us: **Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.**

Now in Romans St Paul is encouraging us

To show outward-focused love, even if no other human being notices,

Or encourages us; even if no human being *thanks us*.

St Paul is encouraging us to reflect the love

That shines first in the Gospel: *God* notices us, encourages us,  
And will even reward us as we pass on his love to others.  
The love that flows from faith in this  
Is genuine love, that has the approval of the Father,  
And that truly builds up the body of Christ.

OK, listen to how St Paul begins to describe this life of love: **hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.**

The 'mutual affection; that St Paul is talking about  
Is, in Greek, *Philadelphia*, or, in English, brotherly love.  
So the sort of love that we are free to show is one that flows  
From recognising that we are part of the same family of God –  
That we have the one Father  
Whatever our worldly distinctions of race, class, or gender might be.  
Of course, one problem with siblings in this world  
Is that there is such a thing as sibling rivalry,  
So, St Paul adds that we do not need to compete with each other,  
But we can show the way forward in honouring each other.

What might this mean? Well, we honour people  
By acknowledging their presence, by listening to them,  
By speaking politely to them,  
By considering their needs; we can honour someone  
By something as simple as remembering their birthday.  
None of what St Paul says in today's reading is rocket science:  
All the aspects of the life of love  
Can involve simple and everyday actions.

Now there's a lot in today's reading,  
And so I'm skipping over some verses as we go through the text,  
But let's focus next on these words: **extend hospitality to strangers,**  
Or, it can be translated more generally as: **Seek to show hospitality**  
When I did a bible study on this reading at the University  
During the week, I asked the students what they thought  
Hospitality meant. One gave, I thought, a good simple answer  
He said that it usually involves having someone in your home,  
Providing a meal for them, making sure their needs are attended to,  
And maybe offering them a clean and comfortable room to stay in.  
I think we can all picture this sort of thing,  
And most of us have either received and or offered  
This sort of hospitality.

Now St Paul is saying, that offering this sort of hospitality  
Can show genuine love for other people.

But if we keep the definition of hospitality this narrow,  
Thinking that we have to have a big home, and enough money,  
And a harmonious living situation before we can show hospitality,  
Then we can miss out on opportunities God is giving us  
To grow in the life of love.

I think it's fair to say that hospitality can be something as simple  
As saying hello to other people in your neighbourhood,  
Or making sure the coffee pot is filled in the kitchen at work,  
Or even being an usher or verger at church.

God has show us great hospitality in Christ Jesus,  
And receiving this hospitality by faith frees us to think  
In new and creative ways,  
So that we are free to live as God's children as we share his hospitality  
Even in very simple things in life.

Let's next focus on these words from St Paul:

**do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;**

It's very helpful to hear this,

Because we naturally want to be with people who have high status,  
And who might give us some advantage in life. What's more,  
We know that Jesus disciples were very concerned about status:

They argued among themselves about who was the greatest,  
And they tried to stop children being brought to Jesus –  
After all, children have nothing to offer in terms of getting ahead.

But we remember that Jesus rebuked his disciples

When they argued among themselves,

And he said that he came to be served, and not to serve;

And that he took the little children in his arms and blessed them.

Jesus, in other words, was willing to associate himself

With the lowly, and as we grow in understanding who he is –

The one through whom all things were created,

And the one who sits at the right hand of the Father,

We grow in understanding that he is not haughty with us,

But comes down to our level to help us in our need.

As we trust that Jesus does come down to our level,

He shares his mindset with us, and we become free

To welcome the little ones in simple ways:

Even making sure that children are welcome in church,

So that rather than scolding parents who are dealing with active kids,

We sympathise with them, give them words of encouragement,  
And make sure that kids can be with us,  
Even so that they can come forward for a blessing in Jesus' name,  
And to be a real and valued part of our communal life.  
And how we welcome children can help us understand more broadly  
How we might associate ourselves with others  
Who might be lowly in the world's eyes,  
But who are highly valued by God

Let's look at one final part from today's reading,  
St Paul writes: **If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.**

Jesus, in the Sermon in the Mount, says

**Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.**

And his first words to his disciples after the resurrection are

**Peace be with you,**

So we know that when St Paul writes about living peaceably

With all people, he is showing himself to be a true disciple of Jesus.

It's good for us to think practically about what this means:

It means not being quick tempered with people,

It means working to understand where other people are coming from,

Including putting their point of view in words that they would accept

As true representations of their feelings and thoughts,

And it means overlooking small faults and not taking offence easily.

Note that St Paul recognises that some people might not want

To be at peace with us, but that we should try from our side

To be at peace with them,

We have, after all, received Jesus' word of peace,

And we are free to share that with others,

Something we even do at some of our services here at Bethlehem.

The last thing we heard from St Paul today was:

**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

Our Lord Jesus Christ was not overcome by evil,

But he overcame evil by his sacrificial death on the cross,

And his love conquered death.

Since we belong to him, let us share in his way of thinking,

Showing genuine love for each other as we serve each other

Even in simple acts, that lead people

To glorify the Father in heaven.

In Jesus' name. Amen!