

Imagine a wedding, maybe your own wedding, or if not your own then the wedding of a close loved one: The church is filled with people, people gathered to celebrate and support the happy couple, the groom stands in nervous happiness at the front of the sanctuary, flanked by his groomsmen on one side and the priest on the other. Trills of joyous music from the piano or organ cut through the chatter of the expectant guests – parents, grandparents, siblings and friends rise in anticipation as the dulcet tones of the processional begin to play. Colourfully adorned bridesmaids carrying bouquets gracefully enter the sanctuary - a teaser of the main event – as the crowd turns back to face the door, watching and waiting. Finally, after what seems like an eternity a woman adorned in a dress of purest white passes the threshold of the sanctuary and the room quietly erupts in happiness, it erupts with the collective love of the gathered crowd, it erupts with an unrivaled joy. The nervousness of the groom is replaced by a sense of pure joy, a smile stretching from ear to ear is plastered on his face – his love for this woman shines through his every fibre, as the moment they have long awaited draws ever-closer. As the bride takes her place beside the groom, the service begins, the priest speaks words of welcome and celebration, prayers are said and then all are invited to sit as passages of Scripture are read. The reader walks up to the lectern and begins... “Love is patient, love is kind...”

If you have been to more than one Christian wedding before, you have probably heard this scripture read and preached upon: it is a staple at many Christian weddings because of its subject matter: Love. Today we heard again this beautiful lyrical and poetic hymn that in the middle of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote about Love. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” That is sixteen(!) different verbs for love, in just 3 and half to 4 verses. It just seems so perfect, after all weddings are about the love that two people have for one another, the love they are committing to foster over their lives together and on and on. It is a beautiful and magnificent piece of our Scriptures, but it is too often miscast as a passage which speaks to our own experiences of romantic, human love. In this passage, Paul is not extolling the value of the love between a husband and wife, he did not set out to write a piece of advice and encouragement to brides and grooms on their wedding day; but rather he wrote this for a different sort of wedding day, the heavenly wedding feast of Christ and his Church. Our passage today was written for the Bride of Christ, written for and to the Body of Christ that is the Church.

Paul wrote this passage as part of his letter to a Corinthian church that was struggling with unity, struggling with divisions over which spiritual gifts and which people were important. Over the last two weeks we have heard Paul’s words, in the previous chapter of Corinthians, about the variety of gifts and the body of Christ. Gifts that build up the body, gifts that are given by God through the Holy Spirit for the sake of Church. As important as these gifts are, Paul turns from his emphasis on spiritual gifts to “a more excellent way,” the fruit of love which is produced by the very same Spirit, who bestows these gifts. Unlike spiritual gifts, the fruit of love is not disparately distributed – it is the will of Triune God that every Christian manifest all the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22, Paul lists ‘love’ as the first fruit of the Spirit’s work of sanctification in our lives. Love – the love which Paul speaks about as patient, kind – is intended for all who receive the grace and mercy of God, in his Son Jesus.

The Love that Paul describes is both breathtakingly beautiful and a harsh standard to live up to. When my wife and I were married we didn’t have this passage read at our wedding ceremony, and I’m glad because if this were a text speaking about romantic love it would be a tall task to follow. Love bears all things? Love endures all things? Love is never irritable or resentful? Now I might be a relative newbie when it comes to marriage – it’s just over five years now – but I can say for certain that I’ve

been irritated or resentful, once or twice! Even when we understand this passage directed to the Church, as Paul's call to the Church to be a reflection of God's sacrificial love displayed for us in Jesus, the task does not get an easier. It is hard, nay impossible to exemplify this kind of love all the time – the Church is made up of people after all: people who do wonderful things together and people that make mistakes; people that build one another up and people that can hurt one another and tear each other down; people that sometimes have nothing else in common except for their love of Jesus and their commitment to God; people that sometimes even dislike one another. The call of the church is not to feel passionately about one another, it's not to like one another or even to be 'nice', but rather it is called to act in self-sacrificing ways toward people that aren't nice to us and whom we may not like one bit.

The Good News, is that we do not do this on our own or by our own power. God has made it possible to love one another: to be patient; to be kind; to not be envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; to not insist on our own way; to not be irritable or resentful; to not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoice in the truth; to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things and endure all things. God has made this possible in Jesus. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has opened for us this magnificent and beautiful love. Not only does Jesus reflect the all-encompassing love that is the very life of God and serve as an example of this love, but in defeating the power of sin and death on the cross, he has given us the grace to experience this love for ourselves, to know that each of us is loved by God in this way. In the first letter of John, we read that "we love, because God first loved us" – God's love for us enables us to love, gives us the power and strength to take up the herculean challenge of living out this magnificent, breathtaking love. In Jesus we learn that we are loved and secure in that knowledge we are freed to share that love with the world: with our family, our friends, strangers and even our enemies.

This self-giving and sacrificial love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in our life, but we are called to cultivate it. We are called to practice this love, even in our weakness and frailty. We are called to be patient with those who try our patience. We are called to be kind to those who don't seem to deserve kindness. To listen to the advice and direction of others even if we're sure our own way is right. We are called to bear with one another, to believe even in the face of doubt and disbelief, to hope even when all hope seems lost and finally to endure even when it seems our strength is failing us. We'll make mistakes, we'll act in unloving ways, but as we practice living out a life filled with God's love, we will prepare our lives for the Holy Spirit's activity in our lives, we will cultivate that first fruit of the Spirit so that our life together will increasingly reflect the very life of God, the love made known to us in Jesus.

In conclusion let us return to the wedding scene: to the bright colours, the melodious music, the joy which hangs in the air like a dense fog. But this time instead of a groom, there is Jesus waiting with joy and expectation with that same foolish grin for his Bride, waiting in anticipation for his Church to come before him in spotless robes of purest white. Around him are the heavenly choirs singing praises to God, the sweetest music your ears have ever heard. For a moment there is quiet as the doors swing open and the Bride, the Body of Christ, the Church, enters in to the heavenly sanctuary and it erupts with the collective love of the Triune God, it erupts with an unrivaled joy not seen before on heaven or on earth. This is the wedding our passage speaks to, this is the love and life we are promised in God. A love that never ends. Thanks be to God! Amen.