

I love to receive letters. Well, post in general, though not necessarily the junk mail. Letters these days are few and far between. An email or instant message are not the same. There is something special about knowing that somebody has taken the time to write to you, by hand. A good letter can lift me up, and there are few letters that I throw away. I have a box full of all the letters that I have received since leaving home, some 25 years ago now. I can safely say, however, that nobody has ever written to me in the way that Paul and Timothy write to the Christians in Philippi. I think it safe to say that Paul loves these guys and really wants to encourage them. He doesn't spend time complaining about the fact that he's writing this from prison, but instead lifts them up and encourages them. I know that if I tried to write from prison there would at least be a mention of the dire food and terrible toilets. For Paul though, it is more important to thank his friends for their generosity, their gifts which would have kept him alive. His physical needs were not important enough to put down on paper, though he does say how his prison guards now know all about Christ, and why Paul is in prison. In fact, if you read on, Paul tells everyone to do everything without grumbling, so that you can stand out as a beacon in a dark world. He who really does have a lot to grumble about instead spends his time giving thanks and rejoicing. In fact, and I love this bit, the very first verse we read today says that every time Paul remembers those he knows in Philippi, he is filled with joy which leads to prayer, he rejoices that they are continuing on with their faith and encourages them to continue until Christ comes again.

Paul must have really wanted the Christians in Philippi to hear these words of encouragement. Parchment was expensive, and money hard to come by when you are sitting in a prison cell. Every word would have been carefully chosen, every subject carefully thought about, before committing to a letter. So what is it that Paul wants to express to the Philippians at this point? What is he encouraging them with? Love, discernment, purity of life, and righteousness. It isn't hard to miss the joy Paul expresses, but there are also themes hardship, humility, hope beyond that suffering which will lead to God's glory.

And that prayer at the end – just wow! If you get the time, just read verses 9 to 11 again, out loud, as a prayer, naming a fellow Christian. Phew! What a prayer! And that's really what I want to talk about today. That prayer. That concept of love, overflowing, increasing in knowledge, full of insight and discernment. And the fruit of that love? That you may be pure and blameless, with God's love overflowing, the fruit of which is righteousness. Not perfection, but becoming more like Christ, with all praise being to God. Let me read it as it has been paraphrased in the Message:

9-11 So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul,

making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

I love the way that that Bible describes love. These days we have such a one dimensional view – we hear the word and, whilst we do know that it is multi-faceted, there is always the assumption that it means romantic love. I confess that I love watching those terrible Netflix Christmas films, where the girl has a rich but obnoxious boyfriend, has to go out of town at Christmas, bumps into a local checked shirt wearing guy, ends up seeing him everywhere and helping him out, boyfriend arrives to find them in an innocent but easy to mis-interpret circumstance, reveals his true nature, then gets dumped by our heroine who suddenly realises that she's totally head over heels in love with the local checked shirt guy.

There you go, I've saved you from having to watch them. But that Hollywood love is not the love that Paul is talking about. The love he is talking about is transformative, it is purifying, it is rich, it is discerning and insightful, it is fierce and protective. Once you get a hold of that love and let it in, it cannot help but shine out from you. It transforms you.

And isn't that what Paul is calling out to the Philippians? Be transformed for Christ. Do not be hidden, let the light of Christ shine from you in all circumstances. When you shine like a beacon then you cannot help but make Christ attractive to all.

Let's just take a moment to let that sink in. That is how God loves you, and so much more. In fact, so much, so deeply, so fully that it is actually

incomprehensible. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, when he prays for them he talks about a love which is beyond our understanding.

Please, do not misunderstand me here. I am not talking about a feeling. We won't always feel this all encompassing love, in fact, maybe we will never 'feel' it directly, or only ever fleetingly but it is there. Like the wind, we can see its effects. When we take the time to stop and really look at the world, to see how intricate is the skeleton of a leaf, the beauty of the stars, the organisation of the ants and bees, or the mycelium which connects plants over vast distances. All of those things are a part of that creative and all encompassing love. Each person here, and beyond these walls is loved in this truly wonderful fashion. What is more, you don't have to earn this love, but only accept it. It is a gift, freely given.

Once you grasp that deep and fierce love, that love which whispers to the elements to quiet the storm, that love which was sent to live on earth as a helpless baby. Once you accept that the God who loves like that loves you like that, then transformation happens, you start to see others as he does, you start to shine. Isn't that what Jesus tells us in Matthew? You are the light of the world. When you turn on a light you don't hide it, you let it shine so that everyone can see. When you have that light, that love, then your actions will give glory to God.

What I find so exciting is that this very same God, who created the world, who created us, who loves us in this all-encompassing transforming way, not only loves you for being you, but wants you to be adopted and become his heir. Now, a small aside about adoption in the Roman world.

It didn't just happen to children. For those of wealth, it was not uncommon to adopt somebody else so that they could be your heir. There are even many accounts of faithful slaves being freed, and then adopted; inheriting all that they had previously been enslaved by.

I have gone off track slightly. Paul and the Philippians. Paul is demonstrative with his love. Yes, he owes them a great deal, they have sent him sustaining gifts whilst he is imprisoned – and another small aside, if you were in a Roman prison, then no food or comfort would be provided. You would have been reliant on your friends and family to bring you in food, bedding, clothes, and anything else, so the Philippians gift to Paul would really have been life giving. But it is not just his thanks that he is sending them. He 'yearns for them with the affection of Christ'. Christ who knows all, sees all, yet still loves in the way that we have talked about. It sets up his friends for the rest of the letter doesn't it. Whatever Paul is going to talk about next has to be heard in the knowledge that he loves them. Whatever tough thinking they have to do in order to understand God better has come from that heart of fierce and transformative, holding and encouraging, building up and growing love.

I cannot ignore that we are now in our Advent period. A time often lost in the busyness of preparing for Christmas. But advent should also be a time of preparation for our hearts, preparing to receive the ultimate gift of Christmas, that of God's love sent in human form. Love isn't all joyful. We know, we've seen the next part of the story, we know where it leads,

the pain and loss, the tears and suffering, but also the joy of resurrection. God's love does not remove the hardship from our lives, the pain that we go through, the loss that we feel, the suffering. But God stands there with us, holding us, surrounding us. Letting us feel, but loving us through it. As a parent I want the best for my boys, always, but I have to sometimes let them feel and just love them through it. When we moved last year, I had to sit with them, my heart breaking with them as they mourned the loss of their friends. But sitting with them, I hope that they knew that they weren't alone, that they weren't going through that tough time alone. That's a God thing too.

So, so many thoughts about love here, and I haven't not done God's love justice. I have only tried to put into words a few of my thoughts. As you go on with your week though, I pray that you will seek that all-encompassing, transforming, comforting, love. That as you pray you will ask, as I will also ask, for God to show you his love for you. That you will have time this week to dwell on that love which God wants you to have.

Let me end with Paul's prayer, which is as much for us as it was for the Christians in Philippi.

I pray that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Amen