

Keep on loving

As we come to the last chapter of the letter to the Hebrews today, we start with a call to action: “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.”

Now, the word ‘love’ is overused in modern society. Why say ‘like’ when you can say ‘love?’ The word ‘love’ is trivialised: We see it everywhere, and hear it every day...it’s easy to get a bit blasé about love. We get a sort of modern day continuum of hate-dislike-meh-like-love.

And I think this trivialisation can take away the significance – or the power – of the calls to love that we find as we read the scriptures. The love that we are called to is more than just a ‘bit more than like’, but it’s a call to action. Love is not just a statement you make, but something you do.

In the context of couples getting married, modern people tend to think of it in terms of ‘do they love each other enough to get married?’ as if we could go to a couple and say ‘on a score out of ten, how much do you love each other’, and as long as they give a high enough answer we marry them.

And while I’m sure Taylor and Travis would rate an eleven or higher, the thing that people should be thinking about is not ‘how much do you they each other’, but ‘how much will they love each other’.

(That’s Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce for those that don’t follow pop news, or have children who keep them updated on such important news.)

Here, in the opening of chapter 13 of the letter to the Hebrews, we are told to “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters (13:1). In John’s gospel, Jesus gave his disciples the new commandment “...that you love one another, even as I have loved you” and when challenged as to what is the most important commandment, Jesus, rather than turning to ten commandments, turned to Deuteronomy 6:5 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” and Leviticus 19:18 “...love your neighbour as you love yourself.”

It is for their love for one another that Christians should be known.

But the writer explains it’s not just a statement of love, but it is love to be lived out.

Verse 2: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers,” Hospitality is important. Welcoming people into our homes and into our lives is important, and sharing hospitality with people is not an onerous task; there may even be benefits in it for us, after all, Hebrews tells us that, “for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” You might remember the story from Genesis 18, where Abraham did just that – welcomed angels without knowing it, and they prophesied the birth of Isaac.

But it’s not all simply sitting around having nice dinner parties... Look at verse 3: “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” So don’t just think about them, but remember them. As though we are in prison with them. As though we are suffering with them.

Be mindful of the pain others are feeling. Be mindful of their suffering. Be mindful of their isolation. The old saying “There but for the grace of God go I,” can be troubling. But think about it: We’re very fortunate to be living where we are. We’re fortunate to be living when we are. We’re

fortunate that circumstances or poor judgement haven't led us into a life of crime. We're fortunate that we're not living in a country ravaged by famine or war or natural disaster.

We're fortunate, but others aren't.

Marriage, the letter tells us, should be honoured by all, and husbands and wives must be faithful to each other. (13:4). Marriage is the closest human relationship there is. We need to be faithful to our partners, and they should be faithful to us. Interestingly, the writer says that marriage is to be honoured by all, not simply those who are married - so even if someone is not married, they need to respect the marriage of others.

Because "God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." (13:4) Judgement is always an uncomfortable topic, but we need to remember that if there is something wrong, things can't be made right without doing something about what is wrong.

The judgement is not ours, it is God's though. Despite what we are told to do, we Christians do tend to be pretty good at judging others. If only, I think, we were so good at judging ourselves – and changing ourselves.

I think the 'adulterer and sexually immoral' rates a particular mention in this context, because people often equate 'love' to 'sexual attraction', and so if we 'love' our extramarital partner, it can't be wrong can it? Yes, it can: Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure.

Of course, we tend to think of sexual promiscuity as a modern invention, but the territories of the Roman Empire were as promiscuous as western world of today. The early church who received this letter would have stood out then, as the church often does today.

And similarly, as it is today, making money was big business in the Roman Empire. But Hebrews implores us to "Keep [our] lives free from the love of money".

Yes. Money is immensely useful stuff, isn't it? You can buy all sorts of things with it. And having a bit more is always useful. It can solve all sorts of problems.

Money can't buy happiness, they say. Perhaps not, but it's very doubtful that poverty brings joy to anyone.

It isn't money though, that the writer to the Hebrews warns us of, but rather the love of money (which we all should know from 1 Timothy is the root of all evil (1Tim6:10)). So, you might wonder what's the difference between loving money, and just liking it a lot?

We can go back to the idea of 'what do we mean by love' – and we know if you love someone, you make sacrifices for them. You put them before others. You put them before yourself. So, if we start sacrificing things for money or for opportunities to make money, then we may well have crossed the line.

Instead of pursuing money, Hebrews says we should be satisfied with what we have. So often, our wealth is our safeguard for the future. We save for a rainy day. We save for our children's education. We save for an unexpected emergency. We fear for the future, and what it will mean for us and our loved ones.

But the writer to the Hebrews assures us of the future we have: For God has said: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" And encourages us to be bold and say "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

Wealth, of course, will often help. It will often get you out of a tight spot. But there are times that there is nothing money can do.

But what God has done for us, can't be undone. It can't be lost. The hope that we have in Christ is sure and it is certain.

Even when we'd forgotten God's promises to us, even when we'd turned away from living the way God wanted us to live, even when we were loving money rather than God, God reached out to us – to each one of us, and to all of us, to reconcile us to him.

Jesus died for us. And in his resurrection he shows us the sure and certain hope of new life, if we simply put our trust in him.

The writer tells the Hebrews that they should "Remember [their] former leaders, who spoke God's message to [them]. Think back on how they lived and died, and imitate their faith.

I'm sure we can all think of Christian people we have looked up to in our lives. And I'm sure we can all remember many people who have lead and taught and supported and prayed for each one of us - generations of faithful people, a cloud of witnesses (Heb12:1), who have gone before us.

And we can all think back on how they lived and died, and we can seek to imitate their faith.

Finally, have this wonderful assurance from the letter to the Hebrews that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (12:8) The writer is very definite on those three times: yesterday, today and forever.

Firstly yesterday, the time of the old covenant. The time before the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Who, as the Word, was present in the beginning, at the time of creation. As John's gospel tells us "In the beginning the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the Word was God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things;" (John1:1-3a)

Secondly, today. The writer emphasises that the message of Jesus isn't simply a message for later, something for the future. Rather, it is something that can't be put off till tomorrow. Or the day after. Or early next month when things aren't so busy. The promise of Jesus, new life in Jesus, is the offer today. We are called to love each other now not later. We welcome strangers into our homes today, not next week.

Thirdly, forever. In his death and resurrection, Jesus has become the mediator of the new covenant. The Jesus who we come to now, is the same Jesus that became human, that suffered and died, and who rose again, and the same Jesus who we will know in the world to come.

God wants people to follow Jesus, to put their faith in him, to pray, to worship and witness in his name. The life of the church, our collective life as a Christian community, as we love our brothers and sisters, welcome strangers, care for others, and respect each other, is a sacrifice of worship.

We should be seeking to please God, not because we can do anything to earn his favour, but because that is the right response. We love, as John says, because God first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Love cannot be earned or deserved, love must be given freely, but love delights when love is reciprocated, when love is answered with love.

So when we go out from here, let's do the right thing. Let us praise God in our actions and in our lives. Let's live as Jesus would have us live. Live as the writer to the Hebrews implores us to live. Let's love our brothers and sisters, let's cheerfully greet people who come to Church, and cheerfully talk to our neighbours too, and welcome them into our homes. Let's remember people in prison with sympathy and not disdain. Let's remember people who are suffering, not simply be grateful that it's them and not us. Let's be honest in our dealings and not seek unfair advantages, and not be driven by the love of money. Let us honour our marriages and those of others. Let us be content in what God has done for us, and be confident in what God has done for us as well. Let us be thankful for the generations of faithful Christians who have gone before us, and faithful to all those who will come after us.

Throughout all of this, let us remember that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

So let us today, and always, do the right thing: Offer praise to God through Jesus, and never forget to please God by keeping on loving one another.

Amen.