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Dear Friends

Romans 12 v 15-21 Matthew 16 9-21

"Do not lag in Zeal be ardent in Spirit Serve the Lord"

This week has been somewhat of a busy one in our household, as we prepare to move on Bank Holiday Monday! Moving home is something to which we as a family have become accustomed. Our biggest move was in 2009 when we returned home to Cardiff from Grimsby, and since then we have moved to a new house six times; you might say we are experienced movers. In my lifetime I have lived in all sorts of places, poky bedsits full of damp, nursing homes with shared bathrooms, a camper van when I was on the road working as an agency nurse, and a lovely detached home which I shared with a friend; all sorts really. Every home I have lived in has brought a new experience and I am grateful for never being without a roof over my head.

As I sit amongst the chaos, rooms full of boxes and the odour of bleach from all the cleaning, I cannot help but think how on earth did Jesus, the disciples and St Paul cope with all that moving from town to town – the words "take nothing with you" ring in my head? Despite my best efforts to shed the junk over the years there still seems to be a huge amount to shift.

But, as I wrap and pack our belongings, the memories of the years bring me joy – old photos, cards, books and pictures – and I think of the beautiful spacious home to which we are now moving. To say I am thankful is an understatement! As I wrap my pictures, I pause to look at one of my favourites depicting Christ's passion.



In our gospel from Matthew this week we hear of how Jesus reveals to his disciples that he is to journey to Jerusalem. Some scholars call this a passion prediction. The disciples find it difficult to comprehend that they will lose the one they have come to love, a brother, a friend, a rabbi, a companion, the one whom they have denied themselves in order to follow. But Jesus reminds them and us that there must be loss or a letting-go in order to live. The way of the cross is never easy, but it is the path that leads to life in its truest sense.

As I gaze upon this picture, I think about how the artist brings a blank canvas to life and I wonder is this giving up that Jesus asks of us like becoming a blank canvas upon which he can create something new? I imagine him painting, starting with colouring the background before

moving on to the finer detail where each colour, each brush stroke is lovingly applied and I am reminded in this image of God's love for us all – a love beyond our understanding.

This love is echoed in St Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. Having read Tom Wright's *Paul: A Biography*, I feel as if I know Paul more intimately (although I find his theology tricky in places). Some of Paul's advice on how to live a life of faith is immensely practical. At the beginning of chapter 12, Paul has set the scene where he gives us the amazing image of the body of Christ comprising of many parts and he begins to work through his list of advice. He starts with the most important Christian virtue – Love. As I once heard a renowned Old Testament lecturer say at college, love isn't so hard to understand; it's just doing it we find difficult!

We are told in scripture to love your enemy, to hate that which is evil or, in Paul's case, to abhor it. Why? Because evil destroys love. It's not easy to love your enemy, it's not easy to forgive (which is the ultimate act of love), so how is Paul's advice going to help us with this?

Paul or his scribe would have written in Greek. The Greek words used to describe this love are *agape*, *philos* and *storge*. For Paul, love is the first principle; it sets the tone for everything else, everything grows out of love and the desired behaviours are a natural expression of that love.

Agape, the highest form of love or God's love for us, is unconditional (that is, without an agenda). I think what he is saying here is that in the world there is an interest in a self-serving love which desires to fulfil our own personal need rather than the genuine need of another; that is what we are called to oppose. We are to aspire to this higher love, not achievable for us as flawed human beings, for this is a divine love. It's almost as if Paul knows this and so he begins to speak of being tenderly affectionate to one another. This is where the other Greek words come into play.

Philos & *storge* bring us to the example of brotherly or family love. This love has a strong bond. A family can be a place where we know each other intimately, a place to share honesty, where we know and accept each other's quirks, flaws and shortfalls. Of course, this isn't true of all families, but it is the principle of that affection, respect and honour towards another person that I feel Paul is emphasizing. This involves both praise and criticism, which we may find difficult to accept, but both are given in this *philos* love for the other. This can be a tall order at times; I don't think there's a family that cannot identify with this.

Paul continues to instruct us not to lag in zeal. Frankly, at times, I find Paul's enthusiasm a bit much. We all have times when we feel up against it, as it were, and our energy begins to wane. So how are we to keep the zeal! Well, again it's almost as if Paul can read our minds as he says 'be ardent in spirit'. What I think he is saying is not to work yourselves to the bone but, in order to be diligent in the face of evil, keep up our zest for all things, attend to our spiritual needs, take rest, take time to be diligent in prayer, and God's grace will bring us strength in our weakness. It's all about a work-life balance. When we get the balance right, we can respond in the love which he speaks of and it shouldn't tire us; in fact it will bring us energy and joy. Whilst I can't help but feel physically exhausted from all this moving lark, I also find myself experiencing a sense of exhilaration.

Then Paul advises us to bless, rejoice and be of the same mind. This reference to blessing is an interesting one which has its roots in the Old Testament; blessing has a great value and substance to it. Have you noticed at the end of our services Vicki always asks God to bless us? In the Greek, 'blessing' translates as the word *Makarios* which means a way of conveying fortune or happiness. For Paul, facing persecution or evil with blessing completely obliterates any idea of revenge, so Evil is repaid with Good.

Being of the same mind doesn't mean we always have to agree but it does direct us to try and be agreeable as far as is possible. This is also true of being at peace with one another. Maybe Paul is encouraging us to think of the part we play in establishing peaceful relationships? We are not responsible for others' response to us, but we can consider how we respond to others. I know one thing I have been overwhelmed by is the response from you all this week. So many of you have offered help, but the thing that I am most grateful for is that I know that we are held in love. You will be thinking of us as we move to our new home just a few miles down the road.

Love in Christ

Belinda