

Along the track

Love is in the Air

The motto of the secondary school I went to was translated (in those days) as ‘seek the things that are above.’ I didn’t understand what that meant. It was never explained, only perhaps that we should be working at getting to heaven. It always seemed to me to be concerned with ambition, doing better, being a bit above others. Recently, I saw that motto translated as ‘set your minds on the higher gifts’ which comes from the prelude to St Paul’s great hymn to love written to the Christian community in Corinth (1 Cor 13).

Corinth was a vibrant, multi-cultural, multi faith port city. It prided itself on being what we might call today ‘a centre for intellectual excellence’. The early Christian community in this city reflected those realities – some members were wealthy, some poor and that found its way into their religious practices, where some celebrations ‘got out of hand’. In the celebration of the Eucharist certain members discriminated against others, drank too freely and treated the poor among them quite badly. Charisms such as ‘speaking in tongues’, while regarded as a gift of the Spirit, were more highly prized than works of charity (1 Cor 13:1–2, 8). It is not surprising that there was significant dissension and backbiting in this community, with a tendency to spread rumours and fight battles, real or imagined, in the courts. Questions regarding morality, particularly sexual morality were widely debated.

Paul offers a positive alternative, a vision of what love is really like. *Love is patient and kind, never jealous, love doesn’t boast or brag and is not arrogant, love isn’t cruel but is generous and it does not take into account a wrong suffered, love shuns the false and finds joy in the truth,...Faith, hope and love, these three remain but without love I am really wasting my time!*

Now the school motto makes sense! Love is certainly one of ‘the things that are above,’ a higher gift. So much depends on love, it is overarching....or it ought to be. We can spend our lives chasing things like reputation, wealth, being the best at this or that, being better than others – they are not the higher gifts. When we look at the world through the lens of love, when we wish and work for the best for others, we see most accurately, we are at our best, we are what God wants us to be! When we look at the world through the lens of suspicion and self-interest, we see and act very differently. In Paul’s words to the Corinthians, *If I speak with the tongues of men and even of angels, but I do not have love, I am nothing more than just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Even if I have the gift of prophecy, and all knowledge so I can penetrate all mysteries; and if I have faith that can remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing at all....* Cor 13:1-2

“Ouch!” I wonder how that made some of them feel!

Jesus told us this right from the start of his ministry when he invites us to ‘repent,’ to ‘*metanoia*,’ which is a Greek word meaning ‘to enter a different, higher mind’. What does Jesus mean by ‘higher’? The Hebrew scriptures describe many stories about sin, stories about arrogance, about vindictiveness, about setting ourselves over others, about cruelty and harbouring grudges, making judgments. That hasn’t changed much, has it!

Leave that behind, Jesus says, raise yourself above all that.

Way back in 1977, John Paul Young graced us with the song “Love is in the Air.”

Love is in the air everywhere I look around
Love is in the air every sight and every sound
And I don't know if I'm being foolish
Don't know if I'm being wise
But it's something that I must believe in....

Unfortunately things aren’t always like that – perhaps when we are in love but generally love isn’t that obvious. To see and hear love everywhere, in the sights and sounds and experiences of the everyday, we have to work at it, to be willing to have the discipline to seek it, to search it out. It takes a change of mindset (*metanoia*), a change in attitude and such a change takes persistence and determined commitment. Sometimes love calls on us to be foolish (‘fools for Christ’, Paul says) and go against what may appear to be ‘wise’ in the world we live in, to go against the crowd, to take the road less travelled.

Paul gave us a clue as to where to start – be generous to others, be patient with them, show kindness, be truthful and don’t put others down or delight in their misfortune. Sounds easy enough but most of us go through life with varying degrees of jealousy, impatience, harbouring the odd grudge or two (or more), willing to blow our own trumpets at times or even spread that unkind rumour. Is that so bad? Isn’t it understandable, after all we don’t have as much money as that other person or such a high position at work – I deserved that promotion anyway and I can do better than her/him. We can become petty and obsessed but we are asked to rise above that, to *seek the higher gifts*. And they are gifts but they don’t come easily.

Regards
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