

The Love of Christ Compels Me

The challenge to keep our faith alive.

Matthew 14:13-21

Love, love changes everything: hands and faces, earth and sky.

Love, love changes everything: how you live and how you die.

Love can make the summer fly, or a night seem like a lifetime.

Yes, love, love changes everything, now I tremble at your name.

Nothing in the world will ever be the same.

The last 18 months have been a very challenging time for everyone and the Church, and perhaps for you personally, it is as though we are in a storm and being buffeted from all sides. Like the disciples on the boat.

Notice how fearful they were. Firstly, the unrecognised stranger in the midst of the storm, and then they were fearful of the wind and the waves.

This is a picture of the Church – often under attack from forces without and within.

In the book of Isaiah, we discover that the prophet writes, “Even young men stumble and fall but those who wait in the Lord shall renew their strength” and when we engage with the Scriptures, we meet with all sorts of people ready to give in and pack up and go home.

Elijah, revered as a great prophet, who was the catalyst of an amazing victory for Israel by defeating the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, runs away and considers dying as a better option than facing Queen Jezebel's death threats. Jonah, when he doesn't get his own way, sits below a tree in the huff and wants to die. Peter, when he lets down Christ, weeps bitterly and we find him going back to his old profession of fishing. He's giving up!

They've chucked it!

All these, and many more people, were wanting to give up and turn back.

The storm comes and we can be discouraged, because we are knocked off our moorings, and it may force us to ask ourselves:

Why do I come here on a Sunday? Why, do I give hours of my time for the Church? Why do I commit myself to the Christian faith?

Today I want us to consider this question –

“What one thing keeps us going in difficult times?”

Where do we find strength to keep on going, spiritual encouragement to keep us on the journey of faith? The Christian journey is not a sprint but a marathon. It takes courage and dedication.

Where did the Apostle Paul find strength?

The Apostle Paul faced more opposition than we can imagine, shipwrecked, abandoned, flogged, imprisoned. He once wrote, “Troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed”.

Where did he find his strength?

What was Paul's secret?

What draws him through discouragements?

He was sneered at by the Greek philosophers, he was frowned on by the wealthy Corinthians, he was attacked by the angry Jews.

In our reading today we find him writing to the church at Corinth, and he gives them his secret, 5:14. Here is Paul's secret in keeping going. Here is his secret ingredient:

“For Christ's loves compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all”.

Paul is compelled to keep on going. What compels him? The love of Jesus.

This is where his strength is renewed, when he takes time to reflect on Jesus' love – a love that goes beyond anything we can even think or imagine – a love that took Christ to the depths of Hell to bring us back to His Father by taking our sins on his shoulders.

Paul marvelled at this, this was the game changer for Paul, The love of Christ given freely for all. Paul was compelled, constrained, forced, coerced, pushed, urged, prevailed upon – we get the picture. He said, *“I can do no other...”*

Love, love changes everything: days are longer, words mean more.

Love, love changes everything: pain is deeper than before.

Love will turn your world around, and that world will last forever.

Yes, love, love changes everything, brings you glory, brings you shame.

Nothing in the world will ever be the same.

There are many people in the Gospel stories whose lives were transformed by the love of Jesus.

Take Zacchaeus for example, a tax collector, despised and shunned by his own people because of his profession and association with Rome. He was outside of the Jewish religious circle.

One day when Jesus was visiting his town, he ran and climbed a tree. Was this to keep away from the spiteful mob?

But even up the tree, hiding in the foliage of the leaves, the love of Christ was to meet with Zacchaeus, as Jesus stops below his tree and calls him down.

Jesus calls him down and invites himself to Zacchaeus' for his dinner. No self-respecting Jew or rabbi would ever consider such a thing, but Jesus reached out to him.

Jesus said, *Salvation has come to this house today*. Yes, salvation did come, but before that the love of Christ touched this greedy man's heart. That day he was reconciled, accepted, forgiven through Christ's love.

Zacchaeus said, in his house, in front of Jesus, disciples and fellow tax collectors, that he would give away all his great wealth, and Jesus blessed him with salvation.

What changed Zacchaeus? What made him want to do such a drastic thing as to give away everything? It was love, the love of Jesus touched his heart and moved him to respond.

The love of Christ compelled him to do this.

We can see in this story what Paul is getting at.

Love compels us to do strange things.

The love of Christ is different from many other types of love.

You may remember that the Rev Michael Curry gave a stirring address at the wedding of Harry and Meghan. You will remember that he spoke of love, a noble theme, a much celebrated theme today.

I listened to a well-known preacher on Zoom last week, someone who has written over a hundred books, speaking about this very sermon, and he said that it was well received in America, but he had a criticism of the sermon, and that was the general nature of love. Love means different things to different people. It is a word that can be abused and misused but Paul was very firm in his understanding of Jesus' love. It was a particular love for it was a sacrificial love.

The love of Christ compelled Paul to give his whole life in his service - Christ's love was special to him. It was a love that was laid down on a cross, not just for good people but for all people. It is a love that the psalmist describes as higher than the highest heaven and wider than East is from West. It's a love that know no boundaries, and Paul himself experienced Christ's love. Ps 103:11,12.

Remember who Paul was – he was the persecutor of the early church, dragging followers of Christ from their homes, having them persecuted and murdered. His life was filled with hatred and he had one sole purpose and that was to get rid of this new breakaway Jewish sect.

But Saul was to meet with the love of Jesus, love truly changed his life. In the twinkling of an eye, a flash of light, a falling from the horse, a voice from heaven, and Saul heard the voice of Christ, *why are you persecuting me?* and that moment started a revolution in his heart. In that moment Saul saw the error of his ways, but more than that, he came to understand the depths of God's love and mercy and that Christ on the cross had died for the worst of sinners and he saw himself as the worst.

So, Saul as we know became Paul, and from that day on the love of Jesus compelled him to share the good news of Jesus with as much energy as he had been using previously persecuting his followers. The love of Christ turned his hatred into love.

It's a wonderful story and it is not just the experience of Paul but there were many whose lives were moved by the love of Jesus.

One of my favourite stories is the woman, the sinful woman, we are not told what her sin was, it may well have been that the woman was caught in adultery, but she came to know and experience the love of Jesus. Jesus was at a dinner at the home of one of the Pharisees. When he was there, a woman came into the house and began to wet Jesus' feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. The Pharisee was incensed that Jesus should permit this sinful woman to do this. Jesus told a parable about two men who owed a debtor large sums of money. One owed him 500 denarii and the other 50 denarii. Neither of them could pay the debt and the lender cancelled the debt of both of them. Jesus then asked the Pharisee, "*Which one will love him more?*" Jesus concluded the scene with the words, "*Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.*"

"Off into the world we go, planning futures, shaping years.

Love bursts in and suddenly all our wisdom disappears.

Love makes fools of everyone: all the rules we make are broken.

Yes, love, love changes everything: live or perish, in its flame.

Love will never ever let you be the same.

Love will never ever let you be the same!

Friends, are we aware that Jesus loves us?"

Have you thought about this recently, that God loves you so much that he laid down his life for you?

This is the true Gospel.

How much are we aware of Christ's love for us?

This adulterous woman's life was turned around and she no longer lived under the shadow of guilt but she knew the forgiveness of God and she was free to live out that forgiveness.

She was compelled that very day to give away her life's savings – an expensive bottle of perfume, thousands of pounds worth, and she poured it over Christ and kissed his feet.

Friends, this is what will keep us going as Christians, this is what will keep us serving his Church, to know and experience Christ's love each day. You are greatly loved by God, and Jesus proves it and he invites us each day to receive his gift of love into our lives.

Through Christ you are forgiven, everything in your past has been wiped out and each day he loves you as much as the one before.

Paul, says to the Corinthians in verse 14, “...Christ’s love compels us...” You can imagine him each morning, whether bleeding from being flogged or imprisoned, in chains, singing hymns at midnight, in prison, you can imagine Paul on his knees, thanking Jesus for his love and this compelling love motivates him to keep on going.

If we want a fruitful Christian life and one that will keep going and not give in, then we have to fix our eyes on Jesus and be compelled by his love.

As long as Peter looked to Jesus he managed to walk on the water. But when he took his eye off Jesus, and looked at the waves and listened to the wind, he was afraid and started to sink and then cried out, “*Lord, save me!*”

It’s a lesson for us also, during this current storm, to continue to look to Jesus, the master of the storm, the one who loves us unconditionally and who invites us to respond to that love through faith.

Yes, the song is right, love does change everything.

Let us sing together, 461, *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear.*