

This is one of a series of my reflections based on the banners that are hanging in St Peter and St Paul's Church, Aylesford. There are 8 banners:

GOD Listens    GOD Enables  
GOD Loves     GOD Provides  
GOD Creates    GOD Encourages  
GOD Cares     GOD Lives

Other banner reflections will follow, but in the meantime a printed version of series of reflections are available in the church.



## GOD LOVES

**C**ontemplating the word love is like crossing a minefield. The word is grossly overworked. We all use the word readily and by doing so mean many things by it. Love, H L Mencken said, is triumph of imagination over intelligence and it was Charlie Brown of Peanuts fame who said that nothing takes the taste out of peanut butter quite like unrequited love.

John though, unambiguously, writes that God is love and he that dwells in love is living in God and God in him. Jesus is clear about it too. 'Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.' Paul's use of the word agape, for love, is a

good start. Agape means, in Stephen Neill's definition, 'the steady direction of the will towards another's lasting good.' Paul's readers found difficulty in accepting that you could love God and that God could love you. Paul was breaking new ground when he told the Corinthian Church that without the gift of God's love any Christian sacrifice is valueless, like a resonant gong or tinkling cymbal. Peter writes: "let your love for each other be real and from the heart." John also writes, in his epistle, "let us love one another, since love comes from God and everyone who loves knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God because God is love."

Reading Paul's list of characteristics of love, in his Epistle to the Corinthians we are left in no doubt. There is nothing love cannot face. Jesus demonstrated that on the cross and as J B Phillips says, 'there is no end to its trust, no fading of its hope, it can outlast everything.'

Modern scientists and psychologists increasingly believe that 'love' is the most constructive element in the universe. In his book, *Love against Hate* Menninger took the position that people break down because they have not been loved and have not learned to love – a real breakthrough because, until then, it was the insight into problems which was seen as the answer. But this just does not work. The answer is love or lack of it. Love builds up and tears down. Love is the supreme value in human nature.

Paul writes in his Letter to the Ephesians: "Because of this, I am kneeling down before the Father, the one who gives the name of 'family' to every family that there is in heaven and earth. My prayer is that he will lay out all the riches of his glory to give you strength and power, through his spirit, in your inner being; that the king may make his home in your hearts, through faith; that love may be your root, your firm foundation; and that you may be strong enough to grasp the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the king's love – though actually it is so deep that nobody can really know it! So may God fill you with his fullness. So to the one who is capable of doing far, far more than we can ask or imagine, granted his power which is working in us – to him be glory."

How amazing is Paul's insight into an all too powerful yet loving God and his insight into the two themes of love and power. The love of power has caused wars and conflicts throughout continents and generations. The power of love has driven weak and vulnerable people to do the most amazing things and also the strong and powerful people to do the most foolish things. Love and power – forces that shape our lives and our world for better or worse.

Finding room for Jesus in our hearts strengthens and renews us, enabling us to take measure of God's love, but how can we measure something that is unmeasurable? It is like asking us to count the stars, to estimate the size of the universe or the volume of the sea. But Paul writing to all Christian churches tells them that they will have the power to comprehend and not only this but to experience. Paul realised, more than most, that life is surrounded

by mystery and that there is much that humankind cannot measure. His writings reveal wonderment at the vastness of God's creation. He became frustrated with those who saw their lives bounded by what was tangible and measurable. God's love is not like that and the more we discover the workings of God's love the more we realise there is to know and find out. And that isn't enough for Paul. He was keen to know that Christians the world over explore new spiritual experiences, cross new oceans, follow new horizons, harvest new fields. Paul believed his readers to be paddling in shallow waters. Paul urged them, as he does us today, to launch our into the greater depth of God's love.