

Lent 4, 30 March 2025: Clothe yourselves with love. Colossians 3. 12-15

During Lent we have been reflecting on the list of virtues that St Paul in Colossians 3 are like the kinds of clothes we should be wearing as Christians.

So, three weeks ago we were invited to clothe ourselves with compassion and kindness. Two weeks ago, we were invited to clothe ourselves with humility, gentleness and patience. Last week, we were invited to clothe ourselves with forbearance and forgiveness. And today St Paul says to us 'And over all these virtues, clothe yourselves with love'. You see compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness are a bit like under-clothes.

Now this passage is quite popular at Weddings. And when I preach on it, I describe all these virtues as undergarments. But then over them all – like a beautiful bridal gown or finely tailored jacket, we are to clothe ourselves with love. And notice what St Paul says about love – it binds the rest of the virtues together in perfect unity

You see, compassion *without love* is rather clinical. In my professional life, sometimes I've had to support people who were about to hear difficult news. And I recall a colleague who was delivering the bad news who, whenever anyone got upset, would push a box of tissues towards the person in question and say 'Have one of these'. That person perhaps thought this was showing compassion, but in reality, it seemed to me like a cold, mechanical, empty gesture.

You can appear to be kind but *without love*, well, we just might ask ourselves – What's your ulterior motive? What's the hidden agenda?

You can show humility, but *without love* that humility can seem like Uriah Heap – not the Rock Band, but if you know the Dickens' novel *David Copperfield* – Uriah Heap 'ever so 'umble' whereas in fact, he's just a bit of an obnoxious creep. 'Uriah Creep' would be a fitting name.

You can purport to show gentleness, but *without love*, gentleness is emptied of any real meaning. It could simply be evasion, or worse, manipulation.

You can show forbearance but *without love*, it becomes a gritted-teeth, grudging putting-up-with, barely tolerating, attitude of mind.

You can say you are forgiving, but *without love* forgiveness is emptied of grace, and such forgiveness may be skin-deep. Jesus himself said to Simon the Pharisee, 'Whoever has been forgiven little shows only a little love'.

But *with love*, compassion is sheer care that never stops to count the cost and shows the deepest empathy and commitment.

With love, kindness is sheer gift, that takes pleasure in bringing happiness and affirmation.

With love, humility is true selflessness that recognises our own weaknesses and is genuinely able to reckon others as better than ourselves.

With love, gentleness is bound up with comfort and tenderness, recognising that we are all fragile and vulnerable; we need to be cared for.

With love, forbearance is recognising that we all have foibles, contradictions, blind-spots, but forbearance shows acceptance of us as we are, so that we are able to learn what we may become.

With love, forgiveness draws the sting of past hurts; we may still have the memory and indeed, forgiveness is a process, but love offers the possibility of healing, of soothing.

So love unites all these virtues. But what do we mean by love?

You know, in English we overload the word 'love'. I might say, I love a good curry, I love football, and I love my wife, but I don't love them in the same way! And love is often equated with feelings, whether of romance or attraction or desire.

The New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greeks had a number of words for love. You may have read C. S. Lewis' book, *The Four Loves*. Here he explains some of those Greek words. So, we have *eros* from which we derive the word erotic, which means sensual, physical love. Then there is *philia* – which means close loving relationships like what we celebrate on Mothering Sunday. It's often used for friendship and affection; from it we get the word *philadelphia*, which doesn't mean

cream cheese, but *brotherly and sisterly love*. Then there is *storgé* which is a wide-ranging word for which could be used of friends, or our pets or love of our country, or music, football, golf, rugby, whatever brings you pleasure; whatever you love doing.

But there is another noun and it was first found in the New Testament – that is *agapé*. Now there was a verb using *agap* as its root. That verb is found in a Greek Translation of the Old Testament made 200 years before Christ. But there is no noun. So, it is suggested that the earliest Christians, who had discovered a new kind of love in the life and death of Jesus, didn't use any of the existing nouns, but kind of invented a new noun, *agapé*. *Agapé* means God-like, Christ-like love; what Charles Wesley calls *Love divine, all loves excelling*. *Agapé* is self-giving, sacrificial love, the love that took Jesus to the Cross. This is the word that is used in Colossians 3 – 'Above, all, clothe yourselves with *agape*'. It is the words used in Paul great hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13 where *agape* is patient and kind, not envious or rude and with faith and hope lasts forever. This is the new kind of love that we are called to live. And *agape* is a gift that comes from God. I tell our married couples – your human love is wonderful, its all about *eros*, *philia* and *storgé*, but God offers you an even deeper gift of love as human love is taken up into the sphere of perfect, divine love. *Agapé* gives and asks for nothing back. But when we experience it, we cannot help but respond.

So, what shall we wear this week? Well, the under-clothes are important, but most of all, over all of them clothe yourselves with *agapé*. Let's seek, with God's help, just to get a bit closer to the love we see in Jesus. It is truly transformative.