

Church of St Andrew, Girton

Sunday 18 August 2024 12th after Trinity

Evensong 6.00 pm

Susan Rawlings

Aim: Philadelphia - brotherly love

Text: letter to the Hebrews, ch. 13, 1-15

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Chapter 13 of the Letter to the Hebrews, which was our second reading this evening, is a very handy pocket guide on how to live the Christian life. Not just a good life, but a specifically Christian life. The letter is of course a document of its own time and context, written in around 60 AD. So some of its teaching may not seem to fit in today's world. But let us have a look to see what the letter can tell us.

Chapter 13 begins "Let mutual love continue". The Greek word for mutual love, or brotherly love, is "philadelphia" - philo meaning love and Adelphi's, meaning brother. And he uses the word "continue" to indicate that this love already exists in the Christian community, the Church. Christians are to carry on what they should already be doing. So what is meant by "philadelphia"? Greek has a number of words to express different kinds of love. Philadelphia, sometimes translated "brotherly love" means the kind of love a brother would have for his brother or his sister, or a sister might have for her sister or brother. A deep affection and a care for the family member. And this love is shared as a partnership. It implies the importance of family among Christians and within the Church. It also recognises that not only are Christians family to one another, but also to people beyond the family circle of the Church. It is our Christian belief that all people are the children of God, whether they accept it or not, so we should

count the whole world our family, deserving of our brotherly love, with all that that implies.

The letter is also quite practical in its guidance. Hospitality and entertaining strangers is a simple way of encouraging philadelphia. Most of us probably do it all the time, accepting that we are all God's children. "Come round for a cup of coffee", we may say, or "let me introduce you to some other people in the congregation here who you may

not have met before”. And the writer of Hebrews quotes that spine tingling experience which Abraham had (Genesis 18: 1-22). Three men came to his tent and he offered them the best hospitality he could. It turns out they were messengers from God, if not God himself.

Christians are then urged to remember those who are in prison, as if chained with them. This no doubt refers to people imprisoned for their Christian faith, and in need of the love and support of their fellow Christians. But does this also include all those in prison, whatever their crime? Are they not also deserving of our prayers and compassion as prisoners of evil, prisoners of the devil, the enemy of God?

This writer of the letter then gives guidance on the subject of marriage: “Let marriage be held in honour by all. Let the marriage bed be kept undefiled.” (13.4). His emphasis is on the importance and value of a relationship which is so close that two people become as one.

The next piece of guidance is perhaps more straightforward. Christians should keep their lives free from the love of money. The underlying point here is that Christians need to learn to put their whole dependence on God, not on material things and possessions which are not lasting. Christians need to trust God implicitly. We all know that we need food and water and shelter to survive and we need the means to provide at least these necessities. But if we can avoid loving money and possessions for their own sake, the gift of contentment will be ours. We will be at peace, content with whatever we have, much or little. We can rest in God’s promise: “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Deut. 31.6). In the words of Psalm 118.6 we can say “The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” In other words, Christians are being encouraged in their faith by leaving go of transient things, and reaching out in faith to God.

We find another source of help in our church leaders, those who guide us in our faith. Their way of life, the writer says, can be an example for us to follow. But we should especially follow the example of our leader, Jesus Christ. His example is unchanging and stands forever.

This leads on to some guidance in worship. We don’t need to be carried about by what the writer calls “various strange doctrines”, possibly referring to the Old Testament

ceremonies and laws. God has already freely given us his love, by grace, and there is no need to seek his approval by keeping lists of rules and regulations. We also have an altar to which all followers of Jesus can freely come - there are no exclusions. That is the altar of the Cross which is at the heart of the Christian gospel and understanding. As we know, many Jews kept to their old custom of worship, and still do, and consider everything "outside the camp" as the writer puts it, or outside the tabernacle of the temple, as unclean, even evil. Christians follow Jesus outside traditional, institutional Judaism Of the time. So Jesus suffered "outside the city gate". But we have fellowship with him, and follow him to his altar, outside the city gates, because we are looking for the heavenly city, the city which our writer tells us is to come (13.14). And the sacrifice we offer is not the animal sacrifice of the old covenant, but the sacrifice, the dedication of our praise to God alone.

So there is much in this letter which can help to strengthen our relationship with one another, our reliance on God and our love for Jesus who is God's son, and also our brother.

Amen