

Lent Series Week 2: Thursday 25th February 2021, based on:

'Being Disciples' Essentials of the Christian Life,
written by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams

Chapter 2: 'Faith, hope and love'

One of the most familiar passages of Scripture is 1 Corinthians chapter 13, quoted at the start of today's Chapter 2. This New Testament reading is often read at traditional Marriage Services. It famously ends with the words "And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love".

I'd like to start with a Prayer, which is sometimes included at these weddings, as it resonates with the words which are the focus of this chapter:

Let us pray:

Father of all, in Jesus Christ, you open to us
the treasures of your kingdom;
guide us by your Holy Spirit,
that we may receive your redeeming grace
and reflect the perfect unity of your love,
for you live and reign,
one God now and for ever.

Amen.

To see and recognise the treasures of God's kingdom, requires the eyes of faith, as disciples of Jesus. Faith is a gift which we choose to receive.

To receive the saving love of Jesus and want to pass it on to others requires the hope of his grace.

'Grace' means God's unconditional and indwelling love.

This love is identified in the perfect unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Faith leads to hope and, together, the ultimate treasure is the unending love of God. It's all interconnected. But why, I wonder, is the greatest of the three, 'Faith, hope and love' considered to be 'love'?.....

In the image below, the word Faith is represented by the Cross. That is our starting point. When we seek after God, our journey of faith begins. We are looking for who God is and what it means to come to know Jesus, which leads to a relationship with him as a follower, that is as a disciple.



This leads on to Hope. The centre part for the word 'Hope', looks like the heartbeat in the second image in green.



When we open ourselves to find God, he opens our hearts and helps them to beat with his. They are inextricably linked. We realise we are inextricably linked with our Maker.

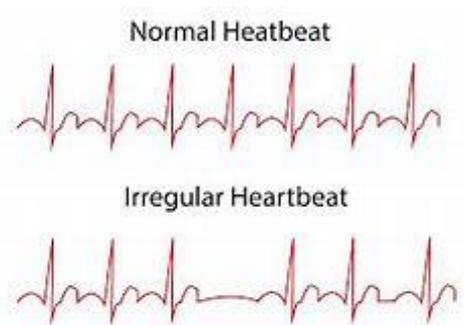


This fills us with hope, as we choose to put our hand metaphorically in that of God's and to take together the journey of life stretching ahead. We realise that as disciples, we can call him Father and Lord and God and Saviour and that



if our heart is beating with our Lord's, then we are spiritually alive and God is Love. This journey of shared love leads us on. It is both sustaining us and flowing out from us, when we experience our hearts beating strongly in love for 'our neighbours'. However, for this to happen we need to have our faith built up in a 'memory bank', through all we are learning and experiencing. Our faith acts as a springboard, while hope strengthens and sustains us travelling with God and with each other.

Rowan Williams develops this by stating that "To grow as a disciple, is to take the journey from understanding into faith, from memory into hope and from will into love". Sometimes we lose our bearings. We forget the answered prayer. We forget the story so far. Like the heart that gets out of rhythm, we need to be re-created in faith and hope and love. Our hearts need a 'restart', to be 'resynchronized'. Let's pause and go into break out groups to think of some problems and crises that face us in our contemporary culture, which can put our hearts out of synchronisation, because we want to believe, but our hearts are struggling.



Let's take 15 mins. In this time we can introduce ourselves and then consider two questions:

"How have you coped with periods of dryness, frustration or emptiness in your life as a believer?"

And a second question is "How, as disciples, can we recover our direction...how can our hearts be resynchronized?"

On pg 22, Rowan Williams is writing about 'Truth'. Sometimes we lose our memory...our bearings...on who we are and who God is.... on the journey so far....

St John of the Cross may have described it as a 'dark night' for intelligence. There has been a loss of confidence in our ability to trace the works of God, to let our minds believe and then boldly relay to the world what God has said. Our hearts have gone out of synchronisation. It's in this sense of confusion, **Rowan states that faith** grows in its true meaning. It isn't a comprehensive answer calling on 'our intelligence' to all our problems. **Faith appears, quite simply, in the form of dependable relationship.**

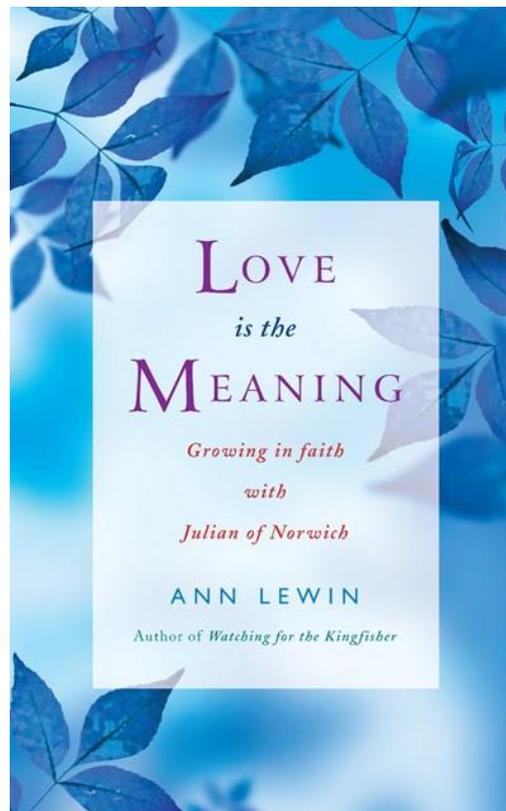
Like Jesus's own disciples, we may be insecure, volatile, easily capable of betrayal, forgetting and running away. We may experience a crisis of confidence. But the one they called Rabbi and Master is the one who will not go away. As finally happened for the disciples, we need to step back from confidence in our own resources and allow our faith to grow through dependence on God. In turn, we then became more dependable for others.

'Hope', Rowan explains, like 'faith', is in relation to what, or a who, which do not go away. The one God, with whom we are in 'relation', knows and sees and holds who we are and who we have been. In our culture and environment and this overwhelming pandemic, so much seems unclear and we need patience to be steadied, so we can grow up into Jesus Christ, as his disciples.

As his disciples, Jesus Christ can bring us in touch with the profound desire that makes 'me who I am and life its meaning', within the whole context of God's world. And I am welcomed as me for my place in it



'**Love is the meaning**', is the phrase chosen by the mystic 14th century writer, Julian of Norwich, to encapsulate all that had been revealed to her in the series of visions that led her to write one of the world's greatest spiritual books, her Revelations of Divine Love.



It continues to inspire countless readers today. Its everyday imagery and warm intimacy set it apart from other great spiritual classics. Ann Lewin uses its homely qualities to provide the basis for an exploration of our own experiences of the spiritual life, as we search for answers to life's big questions eg: What do we do when God seems far away and silent? Can we actually believe that 'all will be well', as Mother Julian did?

Church is a place which we are currently missing, where we go to experience our faith being grown, our hope being renewed. It's where our confidence in God's love for us, our love for ourselves and for each other is strengthened and our hearts resynchronized. At present we cannot easily 'go into buildings' due to the pandemic. But we can still rediscover, faith, hope and love through the relationship we share, wherever we are, with God.

In your experience, though, is Church a place where people are made 'free to receive' in a world that can seem demanding of them all the time. Is this the church you recognise? Do we go to church when possible, for what we want to 'get out of it', or, to 'give to it who we are' ie a 'consumer mentality'?

Let's go back into breakout groups for 10 minutes to consider part of the question which Rowan Williams poses:

"In what ways can churches help people resist this 'consumer mentality' in their approach to worship as well as their approach to other areas of life?"

We have been thinking about 'Faith and hope and love'. Rowan Williams would consider these three are at the heart of our discipleship, of our learning and growing in Christ..... the first two urge us on our journey to discover the strengthening, sustaining, recreative and resynchronising love of God, which is unconditionally and completely dependable. That's our model for being his disciples.

Rowan Williams closes this chapter by writing: "Once we have understood the nature of that to which we are present, in its eternal, unchangeable radiance and glory, everything else falls into place".

Love goes on. When a prophecy comes true, it's done with; you don't need it any more.

When a promise is fulfilled, you don't need it any more; you have the fulfilment.

when children grow up, they don't need toys any more; they have the real thing....

and some day, somewhere – in heaven perhaps, we shall have the real thing,

which all our human science and art and religion were pointing to and then we shan't need them any more.....

but there will never be a time or a place at which people don't need love any more.

Love lasts. Well, there are three things that last: faith, hope and love.

but love lasts longest.

James Wallace 1988 from a poem called 'Love' in 'Seasons with the Spirit' compiled and edited by Ruth Harvey, for Churches Together in Britain and Ireland ISBN 0 85169 267 2