

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.
1 Corinthians 13.12.

Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.

Sublime words about the primacy of love which should think of others before self, but why did Paul have to write this at all? It was because the little spiritual elite in the Corinthian church thought they were better than the rest. The others weren't 'real' Christians at all, in their eyes. If they were, wouldn't they also be able to speak in tongues and prophesy like themselves? They really were 'vaunting' themselves. They were 'puffed up' with their own importance. They certainly weren't being very 'kind' to the little people in the congregation. And even if the other believers weren't as spiritually 'advanced' as they were, a true Christian with love in his heart would want to encourage them, not put them down. 'Love suffereth long and is kind'. Love means putting up with each other.

So for all their spiritual abilities to speak in tongues, they failed to shew the essential thing a Christian ought to have - love.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

All that impressive Bible knowledge, speaking in tongues and prophesying will pass away, but what will last for ever is love:

Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away... And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

This spiritual elite in Corinth prided itself on their knowledge. They were university men - unlike those poor, ignorant people over there. Paul had to remind them of two important things: you have no love in your hearts, and actually you know *nothing*. You

know nothing, because human beings aren't capable of knowing anything. Your looking down on the others in the congregation is like a flea looking down on a louse. Here's the reality, vv9-12:

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part... For now we see through a glass, darkly.

Of course, 2000 years ago mirrors weren't the silvered glass affairs we have today which give us a perfect reflection. They were of polished silver with an uneven surface distorting the image. 'Now we see through a glass, darkly'. We don't actually know a lot, and what we do know is distorted by our own prejudices and agendas. Kant long ago taught us that it is impossible for us to know things as they are in themselves. Remember Donald Rumsfeld from the Iraq War? He, gave us a new phrase when he said that there are known unknowns and unknown unknowns. He was right. There are many things we don't even know we don't know. The great Sir Isaac Newton didn't know in the 18thC that there was a whole world of quantum physics to be known. Yet at the time it was considered that he had pretty much 'cracked' physics. In our own day Stephen Hawking and others are looking for the TOE - the theory of everything. It's breathtaking, isn't it?

Atheists think they know everything. They *must* know everything in order to pronounce so confidently that there isn't a God. We have become awful big-heads of late. We think we know everything, and, if we don't at *the* minute, it's only a matter of time before we do. We are capable of knowing and understanding everything - in time. But we still can't cure the common cold, or stop wars. We reckon to know so much about economics, but the dear Queen was right when she said, 'If the financial disaster was so big and obvious, why did no-one see it coming?' The reality is we know nothing, and we understand

even less. 'Now we see through a glass, darkly'. We are but fleas on the back of a dog. Is the flea even aware that it is on the dog? Is the flea able to describe and understand the dog? Are there any superior fleas who sneeringly pronounce, 'I don't believe in dogs'? Well, that's the equivalent of our saying, 'I don't believe in God'. The gap between the flea and the dog is a lot smaller than the gap between us and God, the Creator of the whole universe.

Paul is calling us back to humility. We human beings are very small, and very, very limited. We don't and can't know enough, so let's walk a little more humbly and not keep jumping to conclusions. The young queen Victoria, anxious to rid her court of Regency rakishness, dismissed in disgrace her lady-in-waiting, Lady Flora Hastings for being pregnant out of wedlock. Two weeks later she was dead from cancer of the stomach. We don't know enough. We see only through a glass darkly, and we shouldn't jump to conclusions about others, about life, and about God. Wittgenstein, the 20thC's greatest philosopher rightly said: 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.' Jesus told us not to *understand* God, but to *love* God, to trust him, because only he sees the full picture. We are like the fleas. We think the dog's furry back is the entire world. 'We see through a glass, darkly'.

I want you next to notice the little word 'now':

Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

One of the greatest weaknesses in the preaching in the vast majority of our churches is the absence of the proclamation of Christ's 2nd Coming. It is absolutely mainstream in the Bible that the Lord Jesus will come again to earth, and at that moment there will be a new

heaven and a new earth when there will be no more tears, no more pain. Sin and death and the devil will be finally defeated. Why the churches don't want to proclaim every Sunday this glorious promise of a better future is utterly beyond me. Perhaps it's because it sounds like wishful-thinking, but the central fact of the NT is Easter: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That event was not the happy ending, reversing the cruelty of those who crucified Jesus; the resurrection was in fact only the *beginning* of God's plan to build the new heaven and the new earth. Christ's resurrection was not just a pious hope; the disciples' actually *touch*ed him.

So there is a 'now' and a 'then'. Now the world is very imperfect, painful and incomplete. But it won't be like that for ever. One day, 'then', there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when Christ returns, and when God will be all in all.

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

We need to rediscover this mainstream NT teaching, to have any real hope. At the moment, 'now', we live with pain, tears, injustice, sin, and very limited knowledge; but *then*, at the 2nd Coming, we shall know everything as fully as God himself knows each of us. What a future! Bring it on, I say. If you want to be part of that glorious future; if you want to be heading towards that destination, then get on board by being 'in Christ'. If you are 'in Christ', you go wherever he goes. If you're *not* in Christ, you will be left behind in this imperfect 'now', this incomplete world of tears.