"Love that is genuine"

We are offering a series of reflections for individuals and churches who may be finding it difficult to provide midweek prayer and shared learning from Scripture. You can use these by watching the YouTube video, reading the relevant Bible passage and then reflecting on the questions below. To help make this a shared activity, you are encouraged to reflect on this together with friends using an online conference package, or simply arrange with a friend for them to watch it too. Then ring each other up, share your thoughts and responses and then pray for one another, and pray together for our world.

Read Romans 12:9-17
If you can, watch the YouTube video: https://youtu.be/y_sQjcCh6Hg

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus made the defining statement "this is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another. Love comes in many shapes and sizes, so when we say that we love a particular type of ice-cream or love visiting a favourite place, this is not quite the same as saying that we love our husband wife or another close friend or relative. Who kind of love does Jesus have in mind when he calls us to love each other? In these verses from Romans, Paul uses two different words for love, one is the classic expression for the nature of the love of God, the other refers to the love that is expressed in our relationships with one another. And his key point is that one should not contradict the other. For our love of each other to be genuine, it must reflect the love of God.

The sentences that follow are rich with images and expressions of Christian love in action, and you might prefer to simply spend time with these words and allow yourself to reflect on them. But as you consider them, there are three things that might guide your thoughts:

Love is expressed through practical actions. Chapter 9 begins with the word "therefore". This often appears in Paul's writings, as it does here, to remind us to turn our understanding of God into practical action, This is reflected in what follows: (v13) Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. (v16) Live in harmony with each other, don't be choosy about who you associate with. The verses that immediately follow invite us to extend this attitude even to our enemies. God's love is often described as unconditional – Is that reflected in the love we have for one another? How can we express that in our present circumstances?

Love places the interests of others above our own. We are told plainly to "Honour one another above yourselves (v10) The call to extend this to our enemies is echoed again in v14 "Bless those who persecute you". We are also urged to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." There are many with whom we can make that response at the moment. Recognise the dynamics at work here – let others set the agenda – let your mood be set by their needs – don't impose your feelings on them. How are we serving the needs of others in our present circumstances?

Love gives us the strength and resources to serve God. Unkindness and criticism can be draining and wearying, it saps our energy – love however can encourage and inspire us. Paul shares a vision of a church that isn't lacking in zeal, full of enthusiasm and spiritual fervour, ready to serve the Lord. Paul encourages this not as some imposed obligation but as an expression of genuine love. He is honest about the fact that they will face persecution (v14), affliction (v12) and endure evil (v17). We need the love of one another to help us find strength in such circumstances. It is through loving one another that we find the resolve to not retaliate and strike back.

PRAYER

Gracious God, your love for me is beyond measure, unconditionally offered and made real through the life and person of Jesus. May the love I have for others be as true a reflection as I can make it, of the love that you have for me. Help us all to foster a community of love, so that even when everything else is stripped away, it is love that remains. AMEN