

## Love Actually

Luke 4:14-21 (-30) and 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Rev Belinda Groves, 5<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2018

Thank you for that beautiful song and the beautiful readings, and can I offer you all – members of parliament, representatives of other nations, fellow-clergy and other guests – my good wishes and prayers for the coming year, and hope that there was some time for rest and relaxation during the break!

One of my Christmas/summer holiday rituals is to watch *Love Actually*, Richard Curtis' 2003 romantic comedy. And my favourite scene in *Love Actually* is – naturally - the one that takes place in church, at the wedding, where Andrew Lincoln's character, Mark, orchestrates an orchestra! A full choir with lead singer, a string quartet and trumpeters popping up from the audience, followed by flautists and trombonists and saxophonists – apologies to those who haven't seen the film – all performing the Beatles' classic, *All You Need is Love*.

But what I actually love about *Love Actually* is that all these interwoven stories of people falling in love and failing in love and learning to love again say to us that sometimes our frame for what love looks like is too tight – too narrow: *that love does not always look like beautiful weddings or people falling in love, but also like Laura Linney's character, Sarah, and her love and care for her institutionalised brother*. This too is love. Actually.

Over the last few decades, and more publicly in recent years, the church has slowly acknowledged how it failed some of those for whom it *should have* been caring. We have not loved, in many cases, our most vulnerable neighbours, and we have held at arm's length those we've regarded as 'strange' – treating them as strangers. Forgetting, as British rabbi and member of the House of Lords, Jonathan Sacks reminds us that, "the Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself,' but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to 'love the stranger.'" Our frame for who we have loved, for what we have loved, has been far too narrow.

Which is what the apostle Paul says to the church in Corinth (in these verses that also pop up at weddings!) "If our focus is on ourselves - our gifts and abilities – *eloquence, foresight, insight, mountain-loads of faith, incredible acts of public service* – we've missed the point. Love isn't about us. It doesn't feature our good points or focus on our highpoints. **Love is about connection points** – about when we move outside the frame – about when we bring others into the picture.

And sometimes this love looks extraordinary, but mostly it looks like this: *people being patient; people being kind; not being envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, not insisting on your own way; not being irritable or resentful*. (A tough call in the rough of

tumble of any profession – ministers or ministers!) It looks like a woman choosing to sit and stay with her mentally ill brother. It looks like a church confessing it has failed to love and learning to love again. It looks like people courageous enough to discover, as Jonathan Sacks says, that people not like us are just people - like us. *“And do you know what,” says Paul. “Can I let you in on a little secret? Plain old ordinary love for others will turn out to be far more extraordinary than predicting the future or fancy speeches or knowing heaps of amazing stuff – it will turn out to be braver and clearer and stronger and last longer than anything... The greatest of these is love.”*

In our gospel reading, too, Jesus addresses the limitations of his hometown’s frame for love. He goes back to Nazareth, and on the sabbath, in the synagogue, stands to read the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.*

And if you read on, you’ll know the audience were all nodding, “What beautiful words! And doesn’t he read well! But hang on a sec. What does he mean, ‘*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?*’ Who is he to proclaim God’s favour on the poor...on the oppressed? Doesn’t he know that the sons of carpenters belong in the workshop and the words of prophets belong on the page and the love of God belongs right here – with us!”

And like a strange precursor to the wedding in *Love Actually*, Jesus orchestrates a scene that is far less welcome. “Don’t you know,” he says, “God’s love is actually this...” And instead of flautists fluting in their faces he flaunts the fact that although *there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, Elijah helped a widow in Lebanon – a foreigner*, and - like the blast of trombones – he blasts them, saying *there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha but none of them were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian – a foreigner and an enemy.*

“Open your eyes.” Jesus is saying. “Widen the frame. Love your neighbours. Love the strangers. Try loving your enemies. This is what God’s love is.”

Commentators have pointed out that these 15 verses – Jesus’ sermon and its reception in Nazareth – encapsulate Jesus’ entire ministry. He comes proclaiming, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”* He demonstrates in his life and teaching what love looks like. And he is rejected. In fact, he is taken up a hill – it’s just a different hill – in verse 29 – to be killed. But the love of God cannot be constrained or contained. It pushes through our resistance, our fear, our limited understandings, to show us, in love of the other, **love. Actually.**

May this be a year in which all of us see and bring about a bigger picture of love.