

Our dear Friends,

We expect that many of you, like us, can hardly believe that Advent is once more upon us. Thank you to all those who kindly sent their email addresses so that we could email them this letter. We have heard of instances where the email version has not been passed to others in the same household! Don't forget your other halves. If there is anyone else reading this that is online and would consent to receiving our letter by email we would be pleased to hear from you.



Thank you again to all those who have helped us with housework, cooking, gardening, office work, the library – the list is endless. Thank you also for your generosity in other directions. Clergy from St Mary's and St Bridget's have taken time out of their busy lives and faithfully shared communion with us each week. This year we have an Alongsider with us. Joanna came in March and will be with us for a year. An Alongsider lives with the community sharing in our life. We are blessed to have Joanna amongst us.

We have posted many copies of our music CD and hear reports of it reaching such faraway places as Fiji, New Zealand, Australia and the United States. We are especially grateful when we hear that it is being played in a place where Christian music would not normally be played. The two comments that we hear most often are "beautiful" and "peaceful". If you would like a CD for a Christmas present please contact us as soon as possible – see the leaflet for details.

Also in a leaflet you will find our programme for next year. It is wise to book early, as each year we have to disappoint those who contact us too late. We have been encouraged by the support given to the Saturday teaching days. Especially we recommend the next day in the Christian Heritage Series where John Isherwood will lecture on Christian Unity. He has written on this theme and it is very much on his heart that we should be one, as the Lord Jesus prayed the night before he died.

In May, the Sisters will again lead, "A Celebration of Heaven". It is such a lovely month - "the darling buds of May".ⁱ There is something about heaven that suggests a perpetual springtime. It will be a day of rejoicing in our eternal home.

St Augustine famously wrote, "Here is the rule: "love, and do what you like".ⁱⁱ It sounds so easy and simple yet put into practice we find it impossible. What do we make of this famous dictum? It cannot be what the world sees as love, something that can be there one day and gone the next. The love of which St Augustine writes is always there. It does not suddenly become hate, as can happen with worldly love, when thwarted.

Neither can it be love that is rooted in self-love. We may love those who flatter us, though hopefully not if we are Christian. When we encounter someone we find difficult, or indeed is difficult, we may say to ourselves, "I am a Christian, I should love this person." That is true but the reality underneath is that often we are feeling anything but love. We are struggling not only to love but with a sense of guilt that we can't. Sometimes we desire reconciliation but the underlying motive is more to do with our own sense of unease and the discomfort of living with a discordant relationship. What happens? We try but whatever we do or say has a false ring about it. That isn't the love of God either. Rushing in because we can't bear to live with a situation as it is, we make a difficult state of affairs worse. C.S. Lewis writes, that when we say, "I forgive you as a Christian" (it) "is merely a way of continuing the quarrel".ⁱⁱⁱ

He also writes about "need – love". We are all born needing love. God has made us that way. There should be enough love in the world so that everyone knows that they are loved. In fact, there isn't enough love when we leave God out of the equation. The danger, especially for Christians, is that we disguise our need for love in good works for others, not suspecting for a moment that our motives are all wrong. We minister to the needy and in so doing disguise our own need. The underlying motive is to be loved in return. We hope some crumbs of love will come back our way. Then it all goes wrong. The "needy" are not always grateful. They may prefer the assistance of another person. The love that we thought we had evaporates into thin air. "For many actions appear to be good, but they are not rooted in love. Thorns also have flowers."^{iv}

Possessive love can trip us up. We look to another person to fill the bottomless pit inside. This may be a husband or wife, our children, a friend or even a professional person. It all goes wrong in the end. These relationships become impossible and demanding. We struggle in many ways to have our need-love met. We exploit natural attributes, such as intellect, beauty and achievements in order to bring admiration. We forget that all we have is a gift from God. What of those not so gifted? Perhaps, they are the blessed because they may sooner realise that we are all poor sinners in the sight of God – needy ones indeed.

Augustine preached, “Love, and do what you like”. St John writes in his letter, “God is Love”.^v It would be wonderful if we could clear our minds of all false conceptions of love. God is pure love. His nature is love; He can do none other than love. His love is both severe and tender; it wounds and it heals. He is a loving Father and divine Judge. His love is beyond our comprehension. There is a place for each one of us in this Kingdom of love but the doorway is low; we have to bow down to enter. A miracle takes place. This love, with which God has loved us, enters our hearts and we begin to love others. Law, whether it is our own conscience or the laws of our land, can restrain wickedness and misdeeds but it cannot give us hearts of love. Only Jesus can do that.

How do we know that we love God? That is the first commandment. It isn't because we have mystical encounters lifting us to paradise as happened with St Paul. This may happen but they do not last. When the day of dryness comes we will wonder if it was all a dream. It certainly isn't because we suddenly become more pious. Jesus taught us there is one sure and certain way that we may know that we love him and that is by our love for one another. This love is not rooted in our need to be loved; it is the love of God himself for those he chooses to place in our path. This is the love of which Augustine writes, “You may say to me, ‘I have not seen God’, but can you say to me, ‘I have not seen my brother or sister’? Love them. For if you love the brother or sister you can see, at the same time you will see God as well, because you will see love itself, and that is where God dwells.”^{vi}

It is a painful love that enters our hearts. Just as Jesus wept over Jerusalem and weeps over our refusals of his grace, seeing the destructive paths that we take, so we too begin to see with his eyes. Love sees all, beneath the posturing, the smile that is covering tears and the rebellion that will bring a bitter end. It is costly to love with the love of Christ. It may lead us to places we would rather not go or break our hearts as Christ's was broken on the cross.

The heavenly Father disciplines us so that his love within us grows, or to put it another way, the self-love in our heart begins to die. Jesus spoke about a vine being pruned.^{vii} We have a vine growing on a warm outside wall. It produces an abundant harvest of sweet grapes but in winter there must be a drastic pruning. Without this it would go wild and next year's harvest would produce bitter grapes. Similarly, all our false loving must perish. The Holy Spirit is merciful. As we are able and willing to bear it, the pruning takes place.

One day, a test will come. We will meet hatred, opposition or ridicule and to our surprise we will discover that we love steadily and calmly. As we yield to the Lord Jesus he can bring about this miracle in each of our hearts.

There is an ancient tradition that the Apostle John, when an old man in Ephesus, repeated over and over again, “Little children, love one another”. When asked why he said this and nothing else, he replied, “because this is our Lord's command and if you fulfil this, nothing else is needed.”

A blessed Advent, Christmas and New Year,

The Sisters of Jesus Way.

ⁱ Sonnet 18. Shakespeare

ⁱⁱ Restless Til We Rest in You - Reflections from the life of St Augustine. Compiled by Paul Thigpen pg.117

ⁱⁱⁱ The Four Loves C S Lewis

^{iv} Restless Til We Rest in You - Reflections from the life of St Augustine. Compiled by Paul Thigpen pg.117

^v 1 John 4:8,16

^{vi} Restless Til We Rest in You - Reflections from the life of St Augustine. Compiled by Paul Thigpen pg.119

^{vii} John 15:1-8

