Sermon preached on 31 January, 2016, by Most Revd David Chillingworth, Bishop of St Andrews and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church

The thirteenth chapter of St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is one of the best-known and most-read passages in the whole Bible – particularly at weddings where it is appropriated as being about the nature of marriage. And as I think about the dozens of times that I have heard it in that context, I also hear it as read by Prime Minister Tony Blair at Princess Diana’s funeral.

Today’s scripture texts encourage us to recapture it as being about its own context. Paul writes to the Corinthian Church because they are troubled – fractious and argumentative. They are into competitive measuring of their spirituality – as he says about speaking in tongues and about knowing mysteries.

In that context, love is not at all romantic but actually pretty tough. It’s about the capacity to hold in loving relationship a whole range of tensions and disagreements which threaten to divide. If that is what it is, it has something to say both to the academic world which is often known for being a little sharp-edged - and to the world of the church which has a tendency to be a less-than-admirable advertisement for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So Paul might well be writing to the Anglican Communion – of which we in the Scottish Episcopal Church are a part and rather whimsically like to see ourselves as founder members. Like the World Communion of Reformed Churches – of which the Church of Scotland is part – we take the name Communion to describe our relationship with one another as a global community of churches. If there is sinfulness in the way in which we behave, it is not in the fact that we have disagreements. Indeed it is hard to see how we could not have disagreements. The recent Primates Meeting at which the leaders of the 38 Provinces came together in Canterbury – and which I attended - illustrates the reality of that. We are trying to work out how to respond to the issue of same sex marriage. Our own society is moving with dizzying speed in its acceptance of same sex marriage as a norm and that stresses our churches internally. We are also trying to hold together as a global communion – stretched literally all the way from San Francisco to Lagos. It’s difficult scripturally, ethically and in terms of justice. We are literally in different places. African churches suffer missionally through association with the Anglican Communion when they face the march of assertive Islam southwards in Africa. We suffer missionally through our association with conservative African churches – particularly in the perceptions of young people most of whom do not see human sexuality issues as a particular problem.

Against that background it becomes important to think about what love really means. Not just people being nice to one another because they are nice people. It’s about whether we can manage tension and disagreement without division. Can the ideal of Communion be a context in which love enables tensions and differences to be held together in such a way that relationship is strengthened rather than weakened. I think that the reality is that Anglicanism across the world is about reaching the limits of that. The Catholic world appears to fare rather better because it has a centralised authority and a teaching magisterium. But I suspect that that simply means that the stresses and strains are not so visible.

So having reclaimed the real challenge which St Paul’s words to the Corinthians represents about the challenge of loving across difference, let’s take a moment to look at today’s Gospel reading from the 4th Chapter of St Luke’s gospel. For here again we meet the reality that what is at the heart of the Gospel has the capacity to stress relationships

Jesus is among his own - local boy made good. You would expect him to know exactly how to massage their well-being and their natural pride in him. And yet this encounter serves to show how challenging the gospel is to those who feel that they have some sense of entitlement – and how quickly the home crowd disappointed will turn against one of their own.

Once again there is nothing soft about the gospel. Jesus chooses two examples which make clear that he is a messenger of good news for the whole world and especially for the vulnerable. It is as if he came to us with our preoccupations about human sexuality and the minutiae of church politics – and reminded us that the focus of God’s love and care is actually with that bunch of migrants, with the children who are without parents. And whether we choose to attempt to draw distinctions between those who are the refugees from the conflict in Syria or those who are simply economic migrants seeking a better life, I suspect that Jesus would be pointing us towards the dreadful conditions in the Jungle Camp outside Calais.

So not surprisingly they all rose up as one, drove him out of the town and prepared to throw him off a cliff.

Christian faith is painful and challenging stuff. The church is not a place in which we can find safety from the challenges of the world – it is not a sort of asylum of the spirit. I sometimes say moodily, as I sometimes tiptoe and sometimes trample through the everyday challenges which I meet as a church leader, that it is a kind of university of human relationships. And success is measured in self-giving love after the example of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ – to whom be glory for ever and ever Amen