

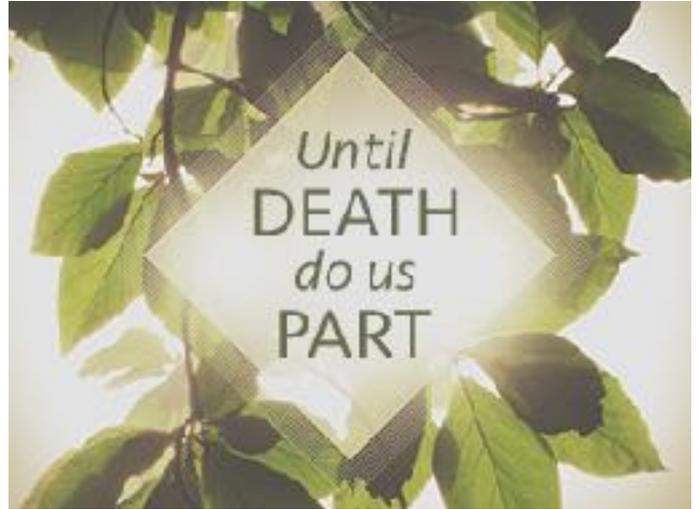
## “UNTIL DEATH US PART”

27th July 2017

Funeral Service for Graham Burgess

Readings: 1 Corinthians 13:4-13

This morning's reading from 1 Corinthians is more common at weddings than funeral services. In fact, part of the reason this passage was chosen was because it was read at Pam and Graham's wedding some 57 years ago. It was part of the vow to be together as husband and wife "Till death do we part" - which, sadly, is today.



Now, a Herald article a wee while ago discussed how many couples are moving away from these traditional vows. An Auckland based celebrant said, "Couples tying the knot are ditching "till death do us part" in their wedding vows, instead choosing more cautious phrases to leave their options open."

One couple said "I will love you today, I will love you tomorrow and if our love shall fail, I will respect you for the period we were together." Another couple vowed a "three- to five-year agreement, plus options", instead of committing for life.

So, it's so special to have couples celebrate major anniversaries. For Pam and Graham to married for 57 years is wonderful and a tribute to them both.

And this Bible reading describes the best love can be and all we can aspire to. It was written by the Apostle Paul to a church tearing itself apart - mega dysfunctional. However the words equally apply to any significant relationship.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Love never fails. Wonderful words. But there's a slight check. Do you feel it? I'm talking realty check. We've seen couples swear true love yet years later tear each other apart in a bitter break-up. We've seen parents doting on their little child but years later estrangement, never speaking to each other. Surely the phrase "love

never fails"- is wishful thinking, sentimental gush, something to put in a greeting card. But the Bible is never sentimental. It's tough, rugged - rubber meets the road - sort of book - even when it's being poetic. Listen to the reality check.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 1 Corinthians 13:8

Now, to make sense of this we need a little background. The church in Corinth was arguing and fighting over what they considered most important. The use of prophecy, speaking in tongues and knowledge - the I'm right your'e wrong sort of knowledge. So Paul's saying, "Listen, these things you find dearest, worth fighting over, will one day cease, be stilled and pass away."

And it's the same for us - whatever we hold dearest - our career, our health, our good looks, bank balance, even our husband of 57 years - these will cease, be stilled and pass away.

And in this the human condition give us **no** hope... Atheists, who believe in no God and no afterlife tell us the sooner we front up to this bitter truth - that when we die theres nothing - the better. They offer nothing to console except "eat drink and be merry for tomorrow you die". Now religions extend some hope. How? Well they all have this in common. They set standards, the standards vary - but they all have them. And if you met the standards - which are pretty high - you may, if you'll lucky, live after death. So Hindus worship many gods and hope for reincarnation. Muslims live out the five pillars of dos and don'ts for a shot at paradise. And Buddhists have the Eightfold Path to nirvana. And there are so many "do's" and "don'ts" in each religion it's hard to keep up and we're never quite sure if we've done enough.

So as we face death, like today, on the one hand atheists tell us to man up and accept there's nothing past our last breath or on the other religions show us a list of do's and don'ts. And if we're good enough we may live on after death. May...? And it's all a bit grim really.

Except for these words in the Bible, "Love never fails". For here's the big difference between Christianity and all other religions. It's summed up in John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

Here is "love never fails" in action. Jon 3:16 tells us the default for every human is to perish. Sin and death has a grip on every human heart - whether the vilest sex offender or the likes of Gandhi and Mother Teresa. Everyone's fate is to perish. However - unlike atheists who give up or religions with lists of dos and don'ts, God

sent his only Son, Jesus. Imagine that. There's nothing like it in any other religion. Completely unique. Why - because, "love never fails".

On the night Jesus was betrayed, just hours before the cross, he gives his own take on John 3:16. He says...

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13

Amazing. Yes, "love never fails". How do we know? Because, Jesus went to the cross, so no person need perish. On that first Good Friday he stretched out his arms in love. Arms that were then nailed to a cross. And after pain unspeakable Jesus cried out "It is Finished" and breathed his last. And all who looked on thought he'd perished. But... but the grave could not hold him down. Death was defeated. For on the third day, that first Easter Sunday, God raised Jesus from the dead. Why? So all who believe in Jesus, who put their trust in him, should not perish but have everlasting life and joy abounding. This is how "love never fails".

Listen, all things we hold dear will one day cease, be stilled and pass away - but not the great love God has for us. This is our hope, our joy, our faith.

So, today, in this brief time we've revisited a Bible passage spoken at Pam and Graham's wedding ceremony. A passage showing us what great, heartfelt, persistent love looks like. A passage that rang out over a young couple as they vowed to be husband and wife "till death do them part". A vow they kept for over 57 wonderful, challenging, difficult, fun and chaotic years. Yet, all things we hold dearest will cease, are stilled, will pass away - except love that never fails. And because of the greatest of all loves, Christ laying down his life, then death does not have to be the final word. For to all who believe in Jesus, asking him to be their Lord, Saviour, Master and Friend, eternal life and a reuniting with all who likewise believe and gone before them, this is our sure and steadfast hope. This is the invitation to each here today.

Let's pray