

Sermon LCA SA/NT District Synod – Alice Springs 2012

The theme for our District Synod in Alice Springs this weekend is:

“Where love comes to life”

and the theme scripture verse is:

1 Thessalonians 3:12 - “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow”

These words are part of St Paul’s letter to a congregation of new Christians. Paul as a pastor and church leader writes to them expressing his thanks to God for them, and his own love for them, and prays for the love of Christ to grow in them. It is worth hearing the verses that come before these words as well:

“6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. ⁷ Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸ For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² *May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.*”

When many of us from down south think of Central Australia, we think of desert - dry, empty, lifeless space. We often don’t see the life that is there, while our indigenous brothers and sisters know that this place is full of life.

We southern people also forget that it does rain there. And when it rains it really rains and “the Centre” “comes to life”. When the Finke river flows, and when the Todd overflows, and after rain at Kakadu “the Territory” comes to life - all sorts of wonderful plant and bird and animal life from God. When God waters his earth what a wonderful place the Northern Territory is to be.

God has watered us too, and we have come to life, new life with him. In baptism he has watered us who were spiritually dry, dead and lifeless people and brought us to new life. God has washed us clean from our sins with the forgiveness Christ won for us by the loving, sacrificing death of Jesus Christ for us. We are alive with the Holy Spirit, we are now “God’s territory”, as he makes his home in us. In baptism God not only poured water on our heads but Romans 5 says he **“has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit he has given us”**.

The love of Christ moves us to do things together that are impossible on our own. It moves us as Synod to support mission in Australia, a spiritually barren place, and overseas. Together in love we train and support pastors and other church workers through Aust Lutheran College, Finke River Mission, ministry to children, youth and families to ensure the Good news of God’s love is passed on to generations. We make sure the love of Christ is heard and felt in hospitals, prisons, schools and tertiary institutions. We reach out with that love of Jesus to those who struggle through Lutheran Community Care and Aust Lutheran World service.

We can’t help it. We can’t contain it, the love of Christ for us simply **“overflows for each other and for “everyone else”**.

¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

“Just as ours does for you...”

Paul ends this short prayer speaking as a leader, a pastor, as the wider church, the District or the LCA even!

Sometimes the leaders of your church seem far away to you, remote and cold even. St Paul says that even though we don’t always see each other in the church, be assured of our love for you, that we remember you before God with thanks and love, and that the love of Christ overflows in us towards you too. As Synod this weekend gathers literally in their territory, we pray that the people of the Territory may sense something of our Christian love for them, and that long after we have gone they will remember that we as church came here to express our common faith with them and our love for them in Christ. Just as Paul remembered in his times of persecution and difficulty that there were others sharing his faith and struggle, so we hope and pray they will remember us, as we remember them and thank God for them and pray for them. Christ is with us, and in Christ we are always together in his love, a love that overflows towards each other and everyone else, and brings his life to them.

¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

Pastor David Altus SA/NT District President

God loves us. He loves us even though we ignore him, disregard him and disobey his will for our lives. His love is so great that it came to life, human life, in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus God's love came to human life because God was on a mission to bring us back to himself, to save us from ourselves and our inherent selfishness.

Jesus walked the earth going to people in love - empty, lonely, guilty, fearful, spiritually dry and hungry people. And he simply loved them.

In fact God's mission meant Jesus had to "love us to death", death on a cross, to deal with our sins, something Jesus willingly went through.

In Jesus, God's love literally "came to life", and went to death, and was raised to life again, all for us, and not only us but everyone.

"This is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven." 1 John 4

"We love, because he first loved us" 1 John 4

We enjoy that love of Christ together, but we are not meant to keep it to ourselves.

Pastor Paul prays:

¹² **"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else."**

We sometimes talk about "glass half full" people, and "glass half empty" people. I wonder when you look at the church today whether you feel like a glass half full, or a glass that is half empty, in fact emptying fast, running out of resources and drying up?

God wants you to see yourselves as "glass **overflowing**" people! - people who have had the love of God, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life poured into us to overflowing. And when the glass, the river in us threatens to dry up inside, God keeps coming to us in his word and in communion and when we remember our baptism and when we pray for his Holy Spirit, his love keeps coming to us.

We simply cannot contain it or deplete it no matter how great our sins, and we cannot keep it to ourselves. It simply spills out - firstly towards "**each other**".

Now as we think of Central Australia, we think of it as anything but a dry, lifeless place, because like St Paul we think of, and remember our brothers and sisters in Christ there. We remember their faith and their love; and we remember the faith and love that sent people there long ago to share the love of God in Christ in the Centre. We thank God for our brothers and sisters and are thankful that pastors and delegates from all over SA and the NT can be together at Synod this weekend, gathering before the God who loves us all. We remember them all today.

In this letter Pastor Paul is writing to fellow Christians whom he has heard a lot about, but he longs to see them himself, face to face. ¹⁰ **Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again...** These Christians also remember Paul and other leaders and how they shared the Gospel with them. They long to see Paul again too. ⁶ **"But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always**

have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you."

This sounds a lot like Synod, and this Synod in particular. We have heard about each other, each other's congregations and each other's cultures. Some of us have met before and remember each other fondly. But there is nothing like being together. And there in Alice Springs our pastor and delegates are, and in a sense we are there too, through them, celebrating and enjoying together the love of God that we know in Jesus Christ.

Paul prays that the love of God in Christ might overflow firstly toward each other. I wonder what love in the church looks like to you? Love in the church is about how we relate to each other- our speech, our actions, our interest in people, acceptance, tolerance, compassion when there are needs, hospitality, trust, vulnerability, and love is about bearing each other's burdens, bearing with each other and how we react when things go wrong. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul says "**love is patient and kind, not jealous, envious or proud, ...it keeps no record of wrongs.**" Love is about forgiving as we have been forgiven.

Love in the church, like love in the home often means doing the ordinary mundane routine things week after week and sometimes year after year. Christian love is about perseverance and endurance for the long haul. Love is about serving, not wanting to be served. Love does not see the church as existing to love me. It does not wait to be loved but makes the first move as Jesus did.

The way we relate to each other as Christians is our most powerful witness to others. Jesus said when he gave the new commandment to love: "**by this all will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another**".

We are going to need that love of Christ all the more in the years ahead. The challenges facing the church are not going to become smaller. We will need the love of Christ to be evident among us as we engage in his mission into the future. We will need that love as together we make tough decisions about our use of resources - pastors and lay-workers, property and money. Love will enable us to make hard decisions and love will accept them. Love will work at staying together in peace and preserve our God-given unity despite our differences, and yes love will move us outside of ourselves towards others who don't yet know Jesus.

Paul prays that God's people might overflow with love not simply towards each other, but towards "**everyone else**".

According to the last Census we all filled out 1 in 5 Aussies said they have no religion and 4 out of 10 don't see any connection with Christianity at all.

God wants his love to flow from the 28,000 baptised and "overflowing with love" Lutherans in SA and the NT to them too.