

4th Sunday of Epiphany, Year C

1 Corinthians 13.1-13

Christ Church, Chelsea

30 January 2022

Sam Hole

“It’s a wolf and there’s no taming it.”¹ For Christmas my in-laws gave me a number of the most famous works of American fiction. One of them, Jack London’s classic *White Fang*, proved to be entertaining reading on these recent dark January nights. For those of you who don’t know the book, it is set in Alaska during the Gold Rush. It tracks the life of the eponymous hero, a wolf (with a little bit of dog) who is captured early in his life by humans. In the first years of his life, he knows only brutality. White Fang obeys his first, harsh owner out of a mix of fear, awe and duty. His second owner is far crueller than the first, setting him to fight against other dogs for money. White Fang becomes ‘the Fighting Wolf’, abused and filled with hatred for all humans and animals he encounters.

But then, he is rescued from his imprisonment by a kinder man. The change of life is not easy going: the new owner’s first attempt to pet White Fang results in a very bloodied arm. But slowly, the wolf-dog comes to sense new feelings emerging in himself. As his owner at last manages to stroke White Fang, we are told the creature grappled with the two impulses inside himself: the imposition on his liberty, but at the same time the pleasant feeling of the hand – especially as it moved to rub around his ears!² Slowly, we are told, White Fang began to learn for the first time what it was to love.³

Talk of love and we may all think of a different person, or creature. As I read again these words from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, ponder it yourself: who in their life embodies these words for you?

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Who do you think of? A friend, maybe? A parent? An aunt, or uncle? A partner?

¹ Spoken by Weedon Scott. *White Fang*, Oxford World Classics edition, p.237

² P.246

³ P.247

I very much hope you have experienced at least something of this love in your life. But, while we may be able to describe it, it is rather harder to define love. We have, for one thing, just the one word to describe a diverse range of relationships. We love a partner romantically. But we may also love our friends, and love our family. And these various kinds of love do indeed largely seem to be quite different phenomena. Put someone in an MRI scanner and ask them to think of a loved partner, or a loved family member, or a loved friend, and three different neural networks are activated in turn. There is, in other words, not one single neural network that engages all instances of 'love'. Try to study what it means to love ourselves, or to love God, and the picture gets even more complex.

We might still offer some attempt at a unifying definition. Love is, as the OED puts it, 'A feeling or disposition of deep affection or fondness for someone, typically arising from a recognition of attractive qualities, from natural affinity, or from sympathy and manifesting itself in concern for the other's welfare and pleasure in his or her presence.'⁴ But that doesn't really seem to get us to the heart of what love is. Try to make that declaration in full on the third date, and there might not be a fourth!

And then we may have to acknowledge that the world does not all agree on what the truest form of love is. Hear Jesus's striking words in the Sermon on the Mount:

⁴³ 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?' (Matthew 5.43-47)

'Love your enemies.' The familiar phrase can easily pass us by today. It is not immediately apparent what that loving involves: just as falling in love and enjoying time with a friend feel very different, so might loving our enemies feel quite different again. But we can sense what Jesus is calling us towards. I am being asked to recognise that the person causing me pain is created in the image of God; I must stop and attend to the brokenness in them – or me – that makes the relationship so fraught. This love is not intuitive. It was not intuitive in Jesus's day, and it is not intuitive now. Even in the Parish Office, it is hard to live out! But Jesus calls those who follow him to a radical form of love. It is the way Christ himself lived, and died. And it is, I would argue, in the face of the many other models of love around, the truest form of love.

⁴ "love, n.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2021. Web. 28 January 2022.

In the end, there is no simple definition for love. Perhaps we have to rely in part on stories. And we can draw I hope too on our experience of love in all its different forms, though it is worth a word of warning on this. The abuse White Fang received from his first owners hardened him for much of his life against the vulnerability and trust of true love. He had never witnessed the patient, kind love of which Paul speaks. In a similar way, we know that those who have experienced abusive relationships all too often fall back into the same. It is not easy to know the truest forms of love when parts of your life have been given over to a partial – sometimes even perverted – form of the same.

And yet, such stories may also point us to the hope of healing. White Fang grew to know true love because he experienced it. And, at the end of the book, we find him enjoying a new life in his loving master's mansion in California. One night a dangerous escaped criminal breaks into the house, intent on murder. It is White Fang who springs on him in the darkness. The commotion wakes the house, who appear in the hall to discover the lifeless prisoner and, beside him, a near-dead White Fang. He has shown the depths of the love he has learned, being willing to give up his life to protect his master. 'Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'⁵

This is the love that Paul celebrates. It is the love modelled by Christ in his life, in his death, and in the new life he brings to the world. And it is, in line with Paul's confidence, love that 'never ends'. For we trust that this is the love which endures; the love for us which we will one day see on the face of God.

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

⁵ John 15.13