

The Power of Love

by Chris Peacock

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. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (I Corinthians 13: 4-13)

There is one thing which stands head and shoulders above all else that we do in ASLAN. It is not the feeding. Not the clothing. Not the mentoring and encouragement. Not even the exposition of the Gospel. It is showing love to those who, in many cases, have never known love.

For the gospel of Jesus Christ, expressed without love, is a message which has lost its heart, and which is ultimately untrue to the teachings and practice of its master.

Because this gospel is glorious good news: *"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)*

It is this selfless, self-sacrificing, unconditional love which we try, in our own small way, to model in all that we do and say in our mission to the homeless.

Love. One small word. Easily said. Easily written into a mission statement. Much less easily practiced when someone chucks tea at you at 4.30 in the morning because of some minor mistake you made. Or tells you in excruciating detail just how much they loathe the meal you spent hours preparing on a Saturday night.

Yet all it takes is a momentary lapse in self-control to undo months of testimony, hours of careful exposition. For people who have been bruised and battered (at least mentally, and often physically as well) are incredibly sensitive to any harshness or cruelty, even if perceived rather than real.

I remember one very large guy who used to come to our Entertainment events. He was very dark, very threatening, and seemed to have a particular fixation with authority figures. As I was the team leader at the time, it was always me

he singled out for his complaints and abuse. One evening, I saw him bearing down on me across the Clubhouse room. I confess I thought: *"Oh no, what is it now?"* He came and sat down beside me. After a moment's silence, he said: *"You know, Chris, I know I'm not a very lovable person. But I was brought up in a grim orphanage. So I've never known a mother's love, a father's love, a brother's love, a sister's love. I've never had a serious girlfriend or a wife, so I've never known a woman's love either. Since no-one has ever loved me, I have never known what love is, never learnt how to love. Is it surprising that I'm not very lovable?"*

For once in my life, I was speechless. All I could do was give him a pat on the arm. Every time I am tempted to say or do something unloving to a homeless person who is giving me a hard time, I remember that conversation.

It's hard, in a society dominated by notions of romantic love, to grasp that you don't actually have to **like** someone

in order to **love** them. And Jesus commanded us to love others: yes, even our enemies.

Love has the power to transform, not just the person being loved, but the person doing the loving as well. When we love the unlovable, when we begin to love our enemies (here's a tip: start by praying for them), we find that our own lives are changed for the better. It is we who are enriched, we who are improved,

we who begin to feel more at peace with ourselves and with others.

We who have been called to love the homeless have been given a great commission. (And I do passionately believe that we did not volunteer, we were **called**.) God thinks so highly of us that He has singled us out to model His unconditional love to the lonely and the lost. No, they're not always lovable, but we need to remember the darkness and the pain that makes them so. And we need to marvel that for so much of the time, so many of the people to whom we minister **are** lovable, despite the darkness and the pain. Can we honestly say that we would be lovable if we were enduring what they are enduring?

When we're feeling tired or irritable during our ministry to the homeless, we need to pray especially hard for the gift of love. And guess what? When we love, that tiredness and irritability will simply melt away!

