

Faith, Hope and Love in the Year of Corona

Danie Mouton

One is stunned by the havoc and loss caused by the rapid spread of Covid-19.

The potential for extreme physical, emotional and financial suffering is extremely high.

Covid-19 illustrates how frail our modern, industrialised world is. How unsustainable our global economy, based on ever increasing consumption, really is.

What realities will we have to face after Covid-19 swept the globe?

Nothing will be the same. We are vulnerable, and as global community in need for a new way of living.

Christians need to ask: What kind of world will we start to build right now?

What is our vision for a new kind of society where life can flourish in a sustainable way?

What values and habits should we cultivate?

The apostle Paul's vision for a sustainable world is captured in 1 Corinthians 13:13: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

These three, faith, hope and love, provide the true foundation for a sustainable world, a world where safety and space to flourish will exist. It is not hopelessly idealistic.

A world drenched in faith, hope and love is a practical, sustainable possibility.

Faith is that which opens us up to God and puts us in the right relationship to God.

Faith is a gift from God, something that we receive. It is not our own effort or merit, and therefore available to all.

Hope is borne out of the conviction that God is in control.

Nothing happens separate from God's presence, and nothing can separate us from God's love.

Love is the greatest, Paul says. The world we are called to create is a world permeated by God-given love.

The Greek word Paul uses for love is agape.

The language of his day had two primary words for love, but neither were sufficient for what the New Testament writers wanted to say about love as a gift from God.

Therefore, they used a rare word, agape, filling it with new meaning.

According to Kenneth Bailey, a New Testament scholar, five things can be said about agape as Paul and the New Testament fleshes it out.

Firstly, it is universal.

This is a love that reaches out to everyone. Even the enemy is to be loved.

The German Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote our enemies are those "who are quite intractable and utterly unresponsive to our love, who forgive us nothing when we forgive them all, who requite our love with hatred and our service with derision".

Everyone is an object to our love. The enemy is not the person who is softened by love and becomes a friend. Christians care about everyone.

Secondly, agape is God's new law, which directs all believers to love God and one's neighbour.

The "law of Christ", the One who died for us all when we were still enemies of God, is to love God and the other. Love is the cornerstone of all public law and proper living.

Thirdly, Christ models what it means to love. We are to love one another "as I have loved you," Jesus says (John 15:12).

Fourthly, we all have various gifts, abilities and contributions to make society sustainable.

We share our skills, time and money. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 love is the indispensable ingredient for each of our gifts.

Without love, everything we offer is flawed. With love, everything is filled with meaning. Fifthly, the source of this love is the indwelling Spirit of God that makes possible the flow of the love of Christ into the life of the believer.

Without the Spirit, agape love is impossible. "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). We see this love in the way the early Christians practically cared for one another. They were not merely interested in one another but carried each other's burdens.

Acts 4:32-35 tells that they were one in heart and in mind, "no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had."

Consequently no one was in need.

Those who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money from the sales to the apostles in order to distribute it to anyone who had need.

Driven by God's love, need, and service met each other, to the benefit of the whole community.

The idea was not that everyone should have the same.

The desire was that no one was to be in need.

Why is love so outrageously generous?

Love recognises that everything I have is a gift from God. 1 Peter 4:10 says: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others"

In the Year of the Covid-19 crisis our love will be tested as never before.

Everyone needs our love and care.

It is time to be courageously loving.

Ds Danie Mouton is the executive director of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Eastern Cape.