

Chapter 1

The Mature Church's Quality

The film *La La Land* won rave reviews in 2016. It was, in many ways, the screen event of the year with its fabulous music, dancing and its unusual boy-meets-girl storyline. It stars Ryan Gosling as Sebastian, a gifted jazz pianist, and Emma Stone as Mia, trying to make it as an actress. They meet in Los Angeles, in a traffic jam, but somehow they are attracted to each other as they pursue their dreams and separately try to climb the uncertain ladder to success.

But having encouraged her, through down times, not to give up on a career in theatre, Sebastian manages to miss her play. She cannot forgive him and ends their relationship, gives up on her dream and moves back home. However, he gets a call from a casting director who had seen Mia's play and wants to contact her to audition for a role in a film. Sebastian drives for miles, finds where she is living, and persuades Mia to take the audition. She lands the part. But though they profess they will always love each other, the relationship finishes.

Five years later, she is a prominent actress but is married to another man and has a daughter. When they are out for the evening, she and her partner stumble across a jazz bar and go in.

It turns out to belong to Sebastian. He notices Mia and begins to play ‘their song’ on the piano. A dream sequence follows which is meant to encapsulate ‘what might have been’ between them. But the reality is that they both put success and their careers first, and their romance had to take a back seat. Mia leaves the bar with her husband and that is where the film ends.

The film won in six categories at the Oscars.

What was striking about this musical was that in many ways it broke the mould. It had tender scenes and great music, but it was totally different from the classic musical romance. Traditionally, the couple fall in love, face many troubles and temptations, but win through and set aside everything else so that they can be together, ‘happily ever after.’ He gets his girl. She gets her man. The message is that romantic love is what life is about.

CHANGED TIMES

But in the changed times of the twenty-first century, *La La Land* was saying something different. It was in effect saying the opposite. Its message was that pursuing your personal dream – for fame, for career, for whatever you see as success – trumps romance. ‘Life is first and foremost about you, not other people, even those for whom you have a deep affection.’ That was the point. Romantic love must take second place. This scintillating piece of cinema is unashamedly me-centred in its philosophy.

We live in the society of the self. We are encouraged to think of ourselves primarily as individuals. The world has always been self-centred to some extent, but it was often hidden under a veneer of ‘niceness’. Today’s more honest generation is prepared to be explicit. Life is about you and your bucket-list.

But the call to Christians, and God’s calling for the church, is to be different from our culture. There is a quality which should make us stand out. It is a quality of striking beauty which

challenges the self-centred view of the world and embarrasses it. And we find that quality woven deeply into the opening of Philippians. Here are the first eleven verses:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

CHRISTIAN LOVE

The overarching quality that should pervade every Christian and every church is Christ-like love. It's not the same as romantic love, though, arguably, it overlaps with it. It is not about thinking of yourself first. It is about deep affection which sacrifices itself for the good of others. This love really is the most important thing in the world.

In effect, the Bible turns the tables on *La La Land* and says that I might be the most gifted person, the most famous person in the world, but without love I am a nothing in God's sight. A church's

growth may be breath-taking. It may become the biggest and most successful congregation in the world, but without love it is just a big fat spiritual zero (see 1 Corinthians 13).

Christian maturity recognises this and goes all out to pursue Christian love in the name of Jesus. Let's see how this underlies all that Paul says as he begins his letter to the church at Philippi.

PEOPLE IT'S EASY TO PRAY FOR

There are some people who are easy to pray for! When you get down on your knees you think of them and a spontaneous smile comes to your face. As you remember each person, maybe in a group, you say in your heart, 'What lovely folk!'

That was Paul's experience as he prayed for the members of the church in Philippi, a leading city of ancient Macedonia. The reason he found it so easy to pray for them was because he loved them and they loved him. (Sadly, it's not so easy to pray for some people!). In fact, Paul loved them so much he didn't like being away from them. He 'longed for them' (v. 8), but it was a joy to pray for them (v. 4).

These opening verses of the letter relate something of Paul's prayer-life for this church and it is shot through with Christian love. The love in the church made it a quality church in Paul's eyes and he couldn't help but love them in return.

HELPING LOVE

The love of the Philippians was practical. 'In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now' (vv. 4, 5). The word 'partnership' can apply to being in a business venture together and sharing your resources. It can be translated 'fellowship' – being 'in the same boat' and practically sharing your life with others. And that's how it was from the very beginning of the

church in Philippi. They wanted to help Paul. The first Christian convert in Philippi was the businesswoman Lydia. As soon as she was baptised she invited Paul and his companions to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us' (Acts 16:15). She helped through hospitality. The Philippian jailer who was converted through the earthquake that hit the prison in the town, was of the same outlook (Acts 16:34). And from there the church had backed Paul and his mission to the hilt. They helped him, often sending money and supplies to him on his missionary journeys (Phil. 4:15, 16). Their love wasn't just words, it was practical.

HEARTFELT LOVE

The care of the Philippians for Paul and his prayerful care for them could not be further from 'cold charity'. There was warm affection between them. Their love for him had deeply penetrated Paul's emotions. 'I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how much I long for all of you' (vv. 7, 8). This is heartfelt love. What particularly touched Paul was the fact that even when he was in prison and *persona non grata* with many others, they stuck with him and kept providing for him and so sharing in his work. They obviously had a deep affection for him, and he for them.

HALLMARK LOVE

The love of the Philippians had been produced by the gospel and was the hallmark that they were genuine Christians. In Paul's prayer that their love would continue to increase, shaped by wisdom and godliness, love is described as 'the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ' (vv. 9-11). Having experienced for themselves the love of God, in having all