

## Sermon – 6<sup>th</sup> May 2018 “If You Love Me” All Saints Church Wokingham

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Gospel reading: John 15.9-17

(Sections in red ink were included in the longer version of the sermon delivered at 9.30am service; shorter version delivered at 8am)

I'm sure there must be a few people in the congregation today that may remember a pop group called Foreigner. They had a number one hit in January 1985 with..... (anyone want to guess?) ....'I want to know what love is'. The record reached #1 in the UK Singles Chart on January 15, 1985, displacing Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas?", staying there for three weeks, and knocked Madonna's long-running "Like a Virgin" out of #1 on the Billboard Hot 100. Hold up... Love, Christmas and virgins, I didn't realise the pop charts were so biblical! Anyway, enough of this, my question to consider today is do we actually know what love is?

Already In my limited experience of preaching, I have quickly come to recognise that some of the best-known biblical passages are the hardest to write about. It may sound contrary but the problem with well known passages is that everyone thinks they know them and already have a view as to what they mean. Today's passage for example is so familiar that I'd guess that nearly everyone here today knew the words before they heard them; yes "love one another as I have loved you", how many times have we heard that? **We even sang those same words in the last hymn; yes, surprisingly there's a little bit of planning gone into this** 😊.

"Love one another". So, how easy is that? Well, certainly easy to understand and easy to say, aspirational but then again, maybe not so easy to do. Of course, it does depend on what you consider 'love' to be, and it's not that easy to get a common definition. For example, did you know that the word 'love' is ranked at number 387 in the most used words in the English language? It's quite common to hear people say I love this or that when they really mean like. The word 'love' encompasses so many different levels from casual daily use ("alright love") through to Jesus' words in today's reading "no-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15.13). But even here, when Jesus was referring to his own imminent death and Peter asserted that he loved Jesus, ironically when Peter claimed; "I will lay down my life for you" (John 13.37), Jesus quickly foretold Peter's forthcoming denial of Him.

As always, isolating phrases out of context often distorts the message and this extract need the rest of the Last Supper text to give it clarity. With such an ambiguous word like 'love' we need other help or clues to determine exactly what Christ meant.

To start with, and most importantly, today's reading is not the first time we hear these words. Jesus had given the exact same instruction a few minutes earlier and had placed particular significance on the word commandment by linking 'love one another' directly with loving Jesus; "I give you a new commandment" and "if you love me. Keep my commandments" (John 14.15). You can probably start to feel the importance let alone the urgency and tension in getting the message understood.

Secondly, in context the words form part of a much bigger picture. You'll recall that John's version of the Last Supper (starting at Chapter 13) is very different from the other gospels. There is no mention of the offering of bread and wine commemorating Jesus' body and blood. John does however, offer us an account of Jesus' humility in washing the disciples' feet and the ensuing dialogue about master and servant. As they settle down to eat, Jesus' mood becomes troubled and he starts to talk about betrayal. He whispers to Judas to "do quickly what you are going to do" (John 13.27) and Judas departs to get the Palace Guard. The clock is ticking, and Jesus does not have much time left with his disciples. The disciples on the other hand don't understand what is going on and are confused and nervous at Jesus' talk of betrayal and his imminent departure, his; "going...where you cannot come" (John 13.34). It is against this background of confusion and particularly evil that Jesus first urges them to "love one another as I have loved you". And if proof were needed, don't forget that Jesus had also washed Judas' feet despite knowing what Judas was about to do.

Thirdly, Jesus qualifies his statement with the words "You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants anymore" (John 15.14). This would have meant more to the Disciples than to contemporary readers. In the First Century Roman Empire, friendship took two forms, political and kinship. The first was the patron/client model where the patron rewarded the client with favours or money in return for information and occasionally their support or the performance of small tasks. The kinship model was more reciprocal, where both parties looked out for the welfare of the other, even to the extent where one might be prepared to die for the other. In smaller rural communities this would be both a survival tactic as well as a basic human need for social interaction. Given the harsh environment and rough justice of the times, life almost demanded both forms to get by and were therefore by necessity more extreme than many of our contemporary friendships. Jesus talks to both models with his disciples, creating a more equal status with them yet maintaining a position between them and God.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly for us, Jesus qualifies his first use of "love one another" with the important words "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13.35). So here is a big clue; the required behaviour will mark them out as being different.

If we put all this together, maybe we start to get a clearer picture of what Jesus is asking them and indeed us. To be a disciple of Jesus we are called to be his friends, both Patron/ client and kinship relationships. If we are his 'friend' then we have obligations. These obligations require us to react to evil, suspicion, betrayal and separation with love; not anger, fear or retaliation, just love. But in its true form it goes further demanding a commitment to lay it on the line and risk everything for him. This is the kind of militant love that stands up for justice, racial and gender equality, social reform, equal opportunities and freedom from all oppression.

I did say earlier that this kind of love might be aspirational and not easy to do. One can cite many possible reasons why, and I certainly recognise myself in some of these reasons; Is it because we judge some people unworthy of our love? Do we hold back because we are wary of the reaction we might receive or worry that our 'love' will not be reciprocated? Is it just too dangerous or outside of our comfort zone? Are we expecting a reward or payback? Is it just too much trouble or we're not really bothered about what doesn't directly touch or impact on our lives and the close circle of our loved ones? Tennyson in his poem "In Memoriam" wrote the famous lines 'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all' but that doesn't seem to be the way of the contemporary world where reward needs to substantially outweigh risk before anything gets done.

But before I paint too black a picture, we do show a lot of love. Every day, we choose love. Perhaps it was looking after a friend or helping a colleague. Maybe it was doing something for someone else or working behind the scenes to make others lives better. Our everyday lives are made up of thousands on minor incidents. It is up to us how we react to them. The easy way is to simply react but sometimes we decide to make allowances and make an unconscious decision to react in love rather than frustration or anger at a slight or hurt. We probably don't even realise we are doing it and forget it straight away.

Of course, there are the other times when we find it hard to love, to forgive, to turn the other cheek. But this is okay because we do love regularly, and we do fail regularly. I read an article recently on just this subject which held that the Church should be the place where we can give thanks for the former and pray about the latter.

And a really positive note is that like in all these things, choosing to love, has a knock-on effect in helping us to more readily recognise the love that surrounds us. When you love you notice other acts of love that previously you might have missed. Conversely, if one is not used to giving love, it can be easily overlooked or missed, taken for granted or shunned.

I started by saying that the most familiar passages are the most difficult to preach. But it is also the case that sometimes they are the most important as well. "Love one another as I have loved you" sums up everything that Jesus taught and is the message that should inspire and direct our lives. But we should use it as a motivator not a platitude. Of course, "love one another" does carry a health warning, but then doesn't everything these days?

Amen