

Love one another

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Sunday 19th May 2019

Gospel reading: John 13.31-35

You may wonder why I chose the hymn 'Take Up Thy Cross' to greet the Gospel rather than 'A New Commandment'. A strange choice considering that the words of 'A New Commandment' do mirror today's gospel reading and especially since in May the theme of our sermons is 'A caring Community'. Easy then, you might think. A 'no-brainer' and lucky old John to hit the jackpot with the reading 'Love one another as I have loved you... by this everyone will know that you are my disciples'. Do I really need to say anymore?

Well, don't get your hopes up too soon because I'm going to.

When Moses went up the mountain, God said he had some commandments for him. Allegedly Moses asked how much they would cost and when God said, "they're free" Moses said, "Oh well in that case I'll have ten"!

So, we have ten commandments, ten precepts, brief, comprehensive, and authoritative, covering the duty of man to God and to his fellow man; and all based upon the great fundamental principle of love. The ten rules for life that have survived throughout the centuries as the tenets of civilisation. Ironically, and it maybe a reflection on the human condition, that most of them, if you want to maintain the relationship with God, are instructions what 'not' to do.

And so it remained until Jesus came to establish the new covenant with God's people and to re-affirm God's love working in the world. But he didn't come to turn over or replace the original Law or Commandments. In Matthew 5 Jesus says, "do not think I come to abolish the law or the prophets: I have come not to abolish but to fulfil" and he then proceeds to take each of the commandments and elaborate on their deeper meanings. So, Jesus' message of love for the Father and for all mankind was not a replacement of the law of Moses. But equally it was also not just an addition or supplement. Jesus' demand that we love God **and** mankind now takes precedence over every other law.

But what kind of love was Jesus advocating? There is a temptation when talking about love to err on the nice or sentimental side and if we are not careful it can get a bit fluffy.

And the words we heard today can easily drift over our heads and become a soft sanitised version of love which means being nice to people and smiling at people we don't know.

If that is the case, we would do well to remember that today's words were spoken just after Judas left to betray Jesus. Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen and worse, knew that within 48 hours he would be tortured and crucified. So, we should be in no doubt, this isn't fluffy. There is a real urgency almost desperation in these words. There is no nice feel good factor. This is the painful, hard hitting action-based love for others that Jesus was demanding.

For example, people often interpret 'Love one another' to mean that we are not allowed to be critical of wrongdoing in case it upsets the perpetrator. We might think it, but we are not supposed to say it. Well Jesus' love definitely was not this "all-inclusive toleration which allowed the external distinctions of right and wrong to be blurred...Christ never counselled an easy going benevolence indifferent to moral values" (Stewart 1977) As James Stewart (the theologian not the actor) says, "that is not Christian love: that is un-Christian laziness."

According to Jesus, the real enemy of God is lovelessness proliferated by a focus, all too common these days, on self-first. Of course, one can argue that selfishness has become an acceptable part of modern life. The media certainly support the 'Me First' ideology; "you need to stand up for your rights and get what you deserve" after all, we are told that "because I'm worth it". There is a fine line between selfishness and independence, and I was interested in Colin's comments last week about independence being unchristian. I'd not thought about it before but the more you consider it, Colin makes a good point. Self-independence is not what Christ was advocating. In fact, Jesus' teaching is clear. By promoting a worldview that when someone has hurt you, you have to stand up for your rights and 'get even' as a way of declaring your independence, Jesus says that this actually shows a radical lack of independence because it demonstrates that you are not independent enough to rise above the hurt. You become its slave not its master.

But that's preaching talk and maybe we would all like to think we can be that 'mature'. In reality, is it really that easy to 'turn the other cheek', especially when you are caught up in the emotion? And there we find the problem. Whereas we almost certainly agree with Jesus' law of love, the trouble starts when we try to apply it in the practical relationships of life. One of the basic issues is whether we can live by this law of love in a modern world where that law is not acknowledged. In fact, for most of us I'd argue that it's a big risk. Of course, if everyone followed Christ's command and were of the same mind set, then it would be easy. But it's sad to say that we live in a society where success is more often judged by material gain, and 'getting one over on someone' is increasingly prevalent. The risk of putting others first is that rather than a strength of character it can be seen as weakness and exploited. Of course, if what people think doesn't bother us then its not an issue. But it's still not easy to maintain this indifference in today's me-first culture. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us", another instruction that is easier said than done. And yes, we may readily agree with every word Jesus says about forgiveness but if we cannot forget that 'Fred' slighted us or 'Charlotte' didn't consult us sufficiently or said something that was not quite true about us, then we are actually miles away from Jesus.

What I'm trying to say is that Jesus' words, "Love one another as I have loved you" are not as straightforward as they may at first sound. Maybe Christ asks too much of us? When he told Peter to forgive his brother not seven times but seventy times seven (Matt 18.21) he was effectively saying that there is no limit to how far love can go. So, is this limitless love for one another idealistic or even possible to effect in our modern world? HG Wells had his doubts writing: "the Galilean has been too great for our small hearts".

But we have to believe that Jesus never asked anyone to do anything he wouldn't do himself and even more importantly never asks us to do anything that we can't actually do even if it seems impossible at the time. And if we need inspiration, we need look no further than our role model. Jesus never held back. Jesus never waited to test if his love would be reciprocated or used against him. Jesus never even

considered the risk. Even on the cross he asked for God's forgiveness on those who had crucified him. The true test of love is how far one is prepared to go. In Jesus' case it was death. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15.13).

Only we as individuals can decide how far we are prepared to go and have that debate with our conscience and God. The Reverend Joachim Alexandropoulos was an Orthodox priest on a Greek island during WW II. The Nazis came one day demanding that he provide them, by the next day, with a list naming every Jew on the island. The next day he handed them a list containing only one name, his own.

So why didn't I use the hymn 'A New Commandment'? Frankly I think you've probably worked out by now my feelings on this. I'm afraid for me it's just too nice, too easy to sing and too easy to focus on the tune and not the words or their real meaning. And if we are in any doubt let's not forget that these words were spoken just after Judas left to betray Jesus. Jesus knew what was going to happen and knew that within 48 hours he would be tortured and crucified because of his love for God and mankind. There is a real urgency in these words that does not come across to me in the hymn. There is no nice feel good factor here. This is a painful, hard hitting action-based love for others that Jesus was demanding. Hence my preference for 'Take up your cross'.

In the need for further prompting, in the letter of James 2. 14-26 we find the following warning:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, ^[a] if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Throughout the ages and certainly in contemporary society, we have constantly fallen short of our love for one another as well as our love for those outside of our community of faith. Theological and ethical arguments have often descended into personal attacks. Even worse, personal interest or self-preservation has often taken precedence over the good of the community. And it still goes on. Colin mentioned last week the latest revelations in a line of many, of abuses that had been deliberately covered up by Church leaders in the Anglican and Catholic Communion.

Jesus is quite clear. It is not by our theological correctness or by our moral purity that everyone will know that we are His disciples. It is simply by our acts of love, our acts of service and sacrifice. Acts that reveal the love of God working in our everyday world.

In the caring community which we all aspire to, it is incumbent on each of us to consider our commitment to the words of Jesus. We may never be tested to the utmost limits of love but even if we are not, we are called to fulfil whatever works of love lie before us. Christ's new commandment calls on us all to seek them out.

Amen