

Easter 5 John 13:31-35

Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

We heard this just now at the end of the gospel reading, but it bears saying it again and again. Love one another, follow Jesus’ example to love the other. It is not a suggestion or a recommendation, a new Commandment I give to you, says Jesus, a commandment no less.

Why in this short reading do we focus on love? – because when we strip away everything else in our faith it is at the very core of our relationship with God. It is so central to who we are and what we do that perhaps it goes without saying a little too often. It is possible that we can drift away from this commandment to love far more easily than we like to admit.

What does it look like when we love one another? Think about Peter’s predicament in the reading we just heard from acts, he was struggling to know what to do when it came to non-Jewish people coming to faith in Jesus. We know that Jerusalem was a metropolitan centre, a hub of trade and visited by people of many backgrounds, ethnicities and religions. Why even the temple design made provision for it in that there is a specific area called the court of the gentiles which allowed the non-Jewish people to visit the temple without defiling its holy place.

So people were hearing about Jesus and believing in him without any Jewish background or faith, Peter didn’t know how to interact with these people. He was brought up to steer clear of those outside his religion because of the strict requirements of the law but now he was no longer a fisherman minding his own business amongst his own people, now he was the leader of an emerging religion, the one that others looked to for leadership, the one Jesus entrusted the mission to when he had left his disciples for the last time. Peter needed to find a way to make sense of all of this and the dream he had, the answer to his prayers of worry and concern came in the form of food, an invitation to share a meal with those from whom he differed so much. That is what it looks like when we love one another, we let them into our life and receive hospitality from them, as well as showing hospitality to them.

But people worried about Peter’s actions, they worried that he was turning his back on who he was and that God would be angry with him for breaking the law in order to eat with the gentiles. Even among his closest friends there would have been those who advised against letting the gentiles in, we can’t quite understand that today, the power of the law to determine who we should associate with and who we should avoid, but that was what faced Peter. We can only wonder if the words of Jesus from today’s gospel came back to Peter as he met with the gentiles. Did he remember that Jesus had left him this one new commandment to love and that loving means accepting, valuing and including the ones we love?

So have we got it? Do we truly understand and carry out Jesus' commandment to love one another? We do it when we share our time, talents and income with those in need of our help. We do it when we make sacrifices that leave ourselves a little worse off somehow but benefit another. We do it when we show kindness or trust towards another even though that makes us a little more vulnerable as a result. We do it each time we have a smile or a generous word to offer another. Each time we carry out the commandment in these and many other ways we reflect God's love towards us to the world and show those who have not yet known it, a glimpse of what is possible.

But we don't always do it. Sometimes we don't feel we have anything to offer so we withhold our time, talents and income. Sometimes we are unwilling to make sacrifices particularly if we think the person to benefit may not deserve it. We hear the world tell us to be strong and look after number 1 so it's rare that we really make ourselves vulnerable to another. And we are so busy at times, even a smile and a kind word can be too much for us to share. Surely we all recognise ourselves in both lists. But just as the love we show reflects God's love, so does the love we withhold reflect something too. It tells those who encounter us when we fall short of God's commandment that we struggle to practice what our religion preaches, it reflects poorly on the church of which we are members and it causes people who have yet to encounter the risen Christ to be less keen to do so.

We have been showered with myriad blessings through our faith in God, but those blessings we enjoy come with some consequences, not instigated by God but by other people and Jesus saw it coming. The thing that made Jesus different and fascinating and attractive to those who were looking for guidance was his willingness and ability to accept and show love to people from all walks of life. He was as comfortable eating dinner with Pharisees and scribes as he was sitting at a well and chatting with a Samaritan woman. When people in the secular world pass judgement on Christianity it is not Jesus they have a problem with, generally, but those who have come after him in his name. We are held to account by the world each time we fail to keep this commandment. We thank God that we are not held accountable by God each time we stumble, by grace we have been saved, and by grace we are forgiven. But the commandment still stands.

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May we recognise that love in our own lives as we continue to aspire to follow Jesus' commandment in every circumstance and where we fail to find it, may we be inspired anew to show our discipleship and faith through the love we display one to another.