

Sunday 15th May
St German's Cathedral

Acts 11:1-18
(Revelation 21:1-6)
John 13:31-35

'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. John 13:34

May my words and your hearing be in the hands of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

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Oh, not that old subject again. Love – isn't that something Christians always talk about and don't act out? The expression by the 2nd century Christian apologist - Tertullian (Apology 39.7) '*see how these Christians love one another*' in its original context of the persecution of Christians was something that those persecuting Christians could not ignore, They could see Christians loving and caring for one another, but in our own day this phrase by

Tertullian is often turned around in a sarcastic fashion to mean the reverse. When Christians squabble and bicker you occasionally hear the phrase: '*see how these Christians love one another*' being quoted in a kind of way that suggests that, that it is the poor conduct we have come to expect of Christians.

While love might have a thousand meanings. Perhaps it might be useful first to see what our particular passage suggests.

The reading is introduced by the words: '*When he had gone out*' v31 – the reference is of course to Judas going out, which began a series of events that led to Jesus' arrest and death and ultimately to Jesus's resurrection. This brief passage introduces a number of the themes that we associate with what we call '*the last discourse*' of Jesus, which runs in John's Gospel from chapter 14 through to chapter 17. (or from the Last Supper to the arrest ion Gethsemane).

Fundamentally what Jesus is doing in the farewell passage and what is introduced here is:

- Getting the disciples used to the idea that he will be leaving them
- Indicating that they will not be able to follow where Jesus is going
- Warning them and reassuring them that things will be alright in God's plan
- Commanding them to love one another just as he has loved them
- Indicating that through this love they have for each other they will be an example to others.

It is these last two elements that I wish to explore:

- Commanding them to love one another just as he has loved them
- and
- Indicating that through this love they have for each other they will be an example to others.

First - Jesus commands the disciples to love just as he has loved them. While the passage is chronologically prior to the crucifixion, clearly

what John has in mind is the extent to which Jesus' love is prepared to go for his disciples (indeed for the whole of humanity) in that he allows himself to go through the most brutalising experience of crucifixion for all.

The full horror of crucifixion is not easy to capture. There is a silver crucifix on the Altar which hardly does justice to the event. Perhaps the German artist like Matthias Grünewald (1470-1528) captures something of the horror in the contorted body on the cross, pierced, bruised and broken.

We glibly speak of Christ dying for humanity on the cross, which is not always so easy for us to understand. How can one person die for all and yet our Christian faith speaks with this kind of language. We can more easily see the reality when we read of tragic incidents in the paper when, for example, someone dives into the water to save a drowning child and may in the process of saving the child drown themselves or perhaps the foreigner who enlists as a medic in Ukraine's army.

In the case of Christ, however, we are claiming much more than this – that somehow Jesus on the cross dies for the whole of creation. The

medieval theologian Abelard (1079-1142) gave a wonderful image that likened the love of God in creation to the annular rings of a tree. You only see the annular rings when the tree is cut open (see slice of tree).

We know that wherever we cut a tree these annular rings exist, but we only see them when the tree is cut. The cross is like the moment in history when the 'annular' rings of God's love become exposed and visible to us.

The sacrificial love of the cross is, as it were, in all eternity of God's love, but we see it most clearly at a particular moment in history exposed.

This sacrificial love which puts God first, neighbour next and self last is what we are called to do as Christians. Of course that is easier said than done, especially if the neighbour is either literally next door and a bit challenging or alternatively at the other end of the world and there is the clamour for attention through digital airwaves, unless it something very shocking (like nudging us out of complacency as we face a major European

threat as in the Ukraine), it doesn't mean much when it gets through to us in the comfort of our living room.

Christians (and I point a finger at myself here ... and you know the expression) are often poor at translating human need to appropriate compassionate action, though Christian Aid Week is upon us and we perhaps recall memorable expressions used by them:

'Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime'

(Excuse the sexist language)

It sometimes demands that we really challenge ourselves to love our neighbour (both far and near) when they may not be very lovable people in our minds and not just send them our old clothes!

Jesus found himself facing those who were not exactly lovely – if we trawl the Gospel of John alone, we find characters that when we take away the gospel glamour and aura that has

since surrounded them were remarkably unlovely people:

like the woman of Samaria who had 5 husbands (John 16:18).

Like the woman caught in the very act of committing adultery (John 8: 3-11). She might well have been a victim once the Scribes and the Pharisees had grabbed hold of her and were ready to stone her (John 8: 3), and while we are given no clue to the circumstances of her adultery, clearly Jesus when trapped into passing judgment on her, never denies her guilt only he turns it around by refusing to condemn her for it.

(You may just want to note in passing that only the woman is hauled before Jesus, when we have been led to believe through the Gospel story that two people were caught in the very act!)

Then there was Judas (already in today's Gospel having slipped out into the night) who would betray Jesus. In the course of the events that follow when Judas brings a detachment of soldiers together with the police from the chief priests to arrest Jesus, Peter

cuts off the ear of the servant of the High Priest (18: 10). Even in the mayhem of the arrest, Jesus takes command of the situation and tells Peter to put his sword away.

Jesus' love takes him to death, to have concern for those who attack him, for the unloved, the traitorous as well as his friends.

When Jesus gives us a new commandment to *'love one another - just as I have loved you'* it doesn't come cheap. There is nothing sentimental about this kind of love.

I wonder if I could invite you right where you are to be silent for a moment (not that you have been doing any speaking) and in that silence invite you to think of one person or group of people that you either bump into regularly or see in the media. I want to ask you how can you be more neighbourly, more loving to them and what you might do to show God's love to them? ...

- 1.) identify who we might be more neighbourly to ...

- 2.) Ask yourself how can I be more neighbourly? ...
- 3.) what will I do about it during this coming week? ...

So as we become more aware of the depth of God's love for us and creation begin to share that love with others just as we have been commanded to by Christ. Then having done this we begin to fulfil what Jesus says that through this love we have for each other it will serve as an example to others. So Tertullian's remark:

'see how these Christians love one another',

might no longer be used in a mocking way, but rather be a statement of how the world sees us.

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