

Lasting fruit – Love one another

On the 11th of September 2001, al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four passenger airplanes.

As we know all too well, two of the planes were crashed into the North and South towers of the World Trade Centre. The third was crashed into the Pentagon, and the fourth crashed into a field after passengers tried to overcome the terrorists.

The attacks claimed the lives of almost 3000 people.

Over 1,000 phone calls were made within ten minutes of the first plane hitting the building - with thousands more being made throughout the day. Thanks to the radios of first responders, mobile phones, the office phones in the Twin Towers and even phones in the hijacked airplanes, some of the people who lost their lives that day were able to send one last message to the outside world. And in those last messages, many of which were recorded, there's a common theme. A common theme of love. To urgently tell loved ones how much they were loved, and to urge them to continue loving those they knew they would be leaving behind.

In our Bible passage today, Jesus knows that *his* time on earth is coming to an end. We're in Holy Week, and it's just days before his arrest and crucifixion, and Jesus has only a short time left to say what he needs to say to his disciples, those who were closest to him. And, it's all about love – remain in me, and make yourselves at home in my love; and, love one another as I have loved you. *'This is my command,'* he says. *'This is what's most important. Get this right and everything else will fall into place.'*

Last week, we looked at the first section of chapter 15 of John's gospel where Jesus described himself as the vine and his disciples as the branches. *'Abide in me,'* he urged his disciples for, if you abide in me, you will *'bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.'* Having described our need to share in his life and love in order to live, Jesus moves on to describe life *among* the branches, how his followers should relate to one another. For some Biblical scholars, these six verses are the centre of Jesus' Farewell Discourse, such is their importance, for we bear lasting fruit as disciples when our love among each other mirrors his love for us.

This is the second time that Jesus has commanded his disciples to love one another. The first comes two chapters earlier: *'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'* And why is it so important? The verse that follows gives the answer – *'By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'* Because

there is something very infectious about love. People see something different and want to join in. You can't but help yourself. The same theme runs through John's letters: *'Dear friends,'* he writes in 1 John, *'since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.'*

If love and unity are infectious, it follows then that *disunity* and conflict have completely the opposite effect. At their worst, they repel potential believers from coming anywhere near the church because what people see is a contradiction, or a disconnection – between what Christians claim to believe and how they then behave. Disunity is nothing new however. Humanity has been struggling with it since the beginning of time. Adam and Eve fell out, Cain and Abel fell out, Saul and David fell out ... unity is really hard. Throughout the epistles, we read of the experience of the early church in trying to follow Jesus' command to love one another, and it clearly wasn't easy.

In Ephesians 4, Paul urges the church in Ephesus to be *'completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.'* In Galatians 6, Paul tells church members to *'carry each other's burdens'*, that they are to *lean* on one another in times of temptation, and help one another through. In Colossians 3, Paul recognises that being together as the body of Christ is not without its difficulties and tells the church in Colossae to *'bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against the other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity'*. The overwhelming message is that love and unity go hand in hand. But know *this*, it's not always very easy.

Over the years, church members world-wide have argued over biblical and theological issues which have caused major splits, but they have also argued over the worship and music style, what to wear to church, what the minister should wear – to robe or not to robe – that's often the question. Whether to have pews or chairs, what type of coffee is served - filter or instant, the quality of the flowers - artificial or fresh, and the list goes on. But when Jesus said in John 14:2 that in his *'Father's house there are many rooms,'* I don't think for a moment that he meant that this was the solution for those who disagree with each other – one room for the Catholics, another for the Protestants, one for those who only sing contemporary music and another for those who will only sing hymns penned before 1850. What we're promised in John's vision of heaven is that we will *all* join with the angels in songs of endless praise. *'Day and night'* we read in Revelation 4,

'they never stop chanting: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.' If we never achieve unity in worship this side of heaven, we're promised that we will achieve it on the other, and we'll even enjoy the endless repetition!

But what *does* loving one another look like in reality? In today's passage, Jesus says that the sort of love he is looking for in his followers is sacrificial love: *'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'* *'Put your life on the line for your friend,'* the Message translation reads. Nothing wishy-washy then! To love people as Jesus loves them is to wash their feet, to serve them in humility; it is to help them rise up in truth and love. But here, Jesus is revealing something more; to love is to lay down one's life for others, to place their interests before our own.

It's every time you joyfully sing a hymn or song that isn't in your tradition or to your taste, because to do so greatly encourages a brother or sister in their walk with Christ. It's to earnestly say 'thou' and 'thine' when every sinew inside you is yelling 'you' and 'yours', or the other way round. It's to be prepared to move from your treasured spot in a Victorian pew and sit on a modern chair because you can see that someone needs a hand placing into theirs, and vice-versa. It's to come to the All-Age Service, even though it's not your thing, because to do so shows that we're serious about welcoming new and younger families. It's to truly affirm someone who is very different from you instead of merely tolerating them. And in doing so, is this not a wonderful example of sacrificial love? To put someone else's needs above our own?

To love is to live in communion with others, to transmit to them the life and love of Jesus. It is to reveal to them that they are loved, loved by Jesus. In this way, we become their friend because we are a friend of Jesus. *'You are my friends if you do what I command you,'* says Jesus in verse 14. *'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.'* What a friend we have in Jesus, we will sing during communion, what a friend indeed.

But the love we have for others is not just confined to those within our church family. It's also to those outside the church. As we talk, meet and share with others, as we accomplish work and try to live out projects, as we live with others in family, in community or as friends, companions or colleagues, as we do little gestures of love, kindness, affection and forgiveness, especially to those who are

weak or in need, we are with Jesus and reveal Jesus to others. In the words of Cardinal Newman,

*Shine through me, Jesus,
and be so in me
that every soul I come into contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me
but only Jesus!*

As we prepare to throw open the doors of this church in June over our celebratory weekend, and offer everything free of charge, knowing that in doing so, we will speak more about hospitality, welcome and Christ's love for all, than any service or sermon will ever achieve. To be generous as God the Father has been generous with us. And, in doing so, may the love we show to our community achieve two things. Firstly, that people will see a confident people of God who love each other, a church very much alive in its faith, working together, where faith and deeds go hand in hand – *'By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'* Secondly, that the love we show will be infectious and will draw people to want to know more about the Christ we follow. We read in Acts 2 that *'all the believers were together and had everything in common.'* This sounds like wonderful unity, and the result: *'the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'* There will be lots of opportunity for everyone to be involved over that weekend, helping and reaching out in many different ways. Please see the sign-up sheet on the table and think about ways in which you can be involved.

Above all, we want to be a church that grows in faith, a church that grows in number as more people come to know Jesus, and a church that serves its community well. How do we do that? We follow Jesus' command. In that last week of his life, when everything was about to change, Jesus says, *'Hold on friends. Yes, everything is about to change and yet nothing will ... Remain in my love and obey my commands. And my command is this: 'Love each other as I have loved you.'*

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we are here as your people, one body, one community, yet we are also here as individuals because you love each one of us, and offered yourself for each one of us.

Help us to come as we are before you; help us to see our way through the challenges of life, so that we can see clearly your path for us.

Amen.