

Year A, Easter 6

Acts 17: 22-31

1 Peter 3: 13-22

John 14: 15-21

The Truth Will Set Us Free

Today starts the beginning of Christian Aid Week. I don't know if you, like me, took part in 'Bob a Job' week at this time of year, when you were younger? It certainly dates me to think that a shilling or 5p was a lot of money and I would do all sorts of tasks to get that 'one bob bit'. I can recall that in our school assembly the curate talked about helping people, and especially people who lived overseas who experienced poor living conditions or were homeless and starving due to war (remember Biafra?). But I am not sure I really connected it to an imperative of the Christian faith – that of loving one another just as Jesus had loved his disciples. 'Bob a Job' was just what we did every year.

In Peter's first letter the author compares baptism to Noah's Ark. The Ark was a place of safety, of refuge, of salvation, a shelter from the storm and the flood. In his letter, Peter equates the water of the flood with the waters of baptism. From what Peter writes, it follows that this and all church buildings and worship spaces should be like the Ark. A place of safety, of refuge, of salvation, a shelter.

Our church – and by 'church', I mean the people who worship here – should ensure it is a place of refuge, of safety, of salvation. The church should be there as a lifeboat for them. A place where there is no sense of danger, abuse, or exclusion.

The flood as described in Genesis 7 brought death and destruction to so much of the created order. After the flood God said on five different occasions that he would never again send a flood. God's covenant with humankind was made with reference to all life on earth; to all living creatures of every kind. This covenant was with all humans, so God's protection is for all people, not for a select few. Therefore, it must be the mission of the church to be God's safe haven for all who need it. This must be a wide-open and inclusive invitation, without any limitations.

In our gospel reading today, we have a continuation of Jesus' discourse to his disciples. Last week we heard Jesus say, 'I am the way, the truth and the life'.

This week we hear Jesus saying very clearly, 'If you love me, keep my commands'. And when I dived into my Greek New Testament I was not surprised to see that the Greek word used for the word 'love' in this passage was *agape*. Since this passage is directly related to Jesus' new commandment (in John 13), the use of the same word, *agape*, is to be expected. *Agape* is, of course, understood to be the highest form of love; the love Christ has for humankind, the kind of love where me and you will put the interests and needs of others ahead of our own interests and needs.

'If you love me, keep my commands' is very succinct and unambiguous. It is easy for us to understand this commandment, but I am sure I am not alone in saying that it can be challenging and hard to consistently put into practice.

But why? After all, I have professed and continue to profess my love for, and desire to follow, the way of Jesus.

Could it be that when I love, I become quite vulnerable? I open myself up to the possibility of being taken advantage of, of being hurt by another person through their words or deeds, or by what they fail to do, or of me equating the 'cost' of the love not matching the gratefulness or graciousness of the aware or unaware recipient? And most of us prefer not to be vulnerable, not to be open to disappointment.

Could it be that when I love, I am required to place a lot of trust in other people? I open myself up to people abusing that trust, so isn't it much safer to have a strong and sensitive 'suspicion radar' operating; to treat everyone with caution and a heavy dollop of cynicism that my trust will be betrayed?

Could it be that when I love, I am required to re-evaluate my own values, assumptions and perceptions, to move from a simplistic yes/no mindset to a much more fluid non-dualistic approach of 'both/and'? To be willing to change my own understanding of the world and some of my values and judgements in the light of understanding and learning from another's story and see with fresh eyes and hear with fresh ears? To see with the eyes of Jesus? To be challenged about some long-held ideas that seemed fine to me, but now may need to be revised or swept away?

And these are just a few of my 'excuses' for finding 'love one another' a challenge. It seems to demonstrate that love, the love that is *agape*, takes conscious effort – some days far more than others. And that type of love makes us vulnerable, as we open up to having that love abused, to having to move

beyond a simple dualistic world, to living a life where rigid boundaries and old certainties give way to being open to receiving wisdom and understanding from unexpected sources that change our map of our world.

And yet, I know that Jesus wasn't like Sergeant Wilson in Dad's Army. It wasn't a very timid and polite request, 'Would you mind awfully, if I could just ask you to consider showing agape love to one another, that would be so kind of you...' No! Jesus reminded them that it was his command to them, with no ifs or buts, or sub-clauses of exclusions and exceptions.

I wonder what comes to your mind when you prayerfully contemplate Jesus saying to you, 'If you love me, keep my commands'? This passage of scripture would make an excellent Lectio Divina exercise, and I recommend it to you, as worth doing. Listen to the passage a few times. What word or phrase are you particularly drawn to? Enter into the story, sit amongst the disciples, imagine the scene, the smells, the heat, the atmosphere. Listen to the conversation. What would you like to ask Jesus? How does Jesus respond?

I know when I made the conscious decision to follow Christ's way and chose to follow the path of *agape* love. And I know I must renew that commitment frequently, to remind myself of God's love for me and for all humankind, and to find ways to use Christ as my support when I feel my acts of agape love, following Christ's example, have led me to be hurt. When I walked the camino in 2016, as I started the transition from being an HR professional to being an ordained deacon and then priest, I recommitted myself to Jesus' command to love one another, knowing that, with God's help, I could face the challenges and follow Christ's way. I have done my best to live by it because I know that the church would look so, so, different and so much more attractive to those of no faith if we were able to meet the challenge of the commandment, and the world would be a much better place too. The challenge is:

- ✝ to accept people – those we agree with and those we don't agree with,
- ✝ to listen to understand,
- ✝ to seek the best for others,
- ✝ to show compassion,
- ✝ to seek God's peace (shalom) for ourselves and for others,
- ✝ to hunger for justice,
- ✝ to become authentically vulnerable to the world's pain and suffering
- ✝ to love the alien and the stranger
- ✝ to love those who don't look or act like us

- ✝ to subjugate our own self's importance and our desire to remain in total control
- ✝ to be honest with ourselves, and to be gentle and forgive ourselves.

The challenge is made so much easier for each one of us, because Jesus was clear that God's own Spirit would live within us, to make possible this agape love that otherwise would not be possible to achieve.

As people of the resurrection and the ascension, we have access to God's own Spirit, to lead and guide us, and to enable us to follow Jesus' commandment to love one another. And when that commandment is lived out in all of our lives and in the lives of all the other Christians, what a different world we will have; a world that really reflects God's kingdom.

Jesus' command is to each one of us, here and now, today and for all our days. My 'bob a job' tasks all those years ago were, unknown to me, a living out of that command. And fifty something years later, I am consciously, every day, doing what I can to fulfil that command. And I know I feel a lot more free than I ever did before I made that decision. As we sung in the gradual hymn, the truth will set us free. Free from so much that harms us and stops us from living a life in the full light of Christ.

Jesus said, 'Love one another, just as I have loved you'. Do this, and you will be set free.