

Year C Easter 5 18th May 2025

Acts 11:1-18, Rev 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Even if you forget everything else I have taught you, Jesus says, just remember this. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. That command to the disciples at the Last Supper might be described as Jesus' spiritual will and testament.

And, of course, it was a new command. Earlier in the Gospels we are reminded that the two great commandments are to love God with all our heart and soul and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Now Jesus takes it a new level. And he goes on to say: By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

And the extraordinary thing is the timing of it – something the lectionary very misleadingly skips over. His words come right at the start of what is known as the Great Discourse at the last supper, immediately after Judas slips away to betray him and moments before he predicts that Peter will deny him.

On what must have been the worst night of his life Jesus could have been forgiven for being preoccupied with Judas's betrayal, with Peter's impending rejection, with his imminent death.

But no, he gives his disciples this new command. And note what he doesn't say. He doesn't tell them to believe this or that piece of doctrine, he doesn't tell them to read the Scriptures every day, he doesn't tell them to pray more, he doesn't tell them how to worship or what sort of church would be best. It's all distilled down to love. Christianity in a nutshell.

Love one another as I have loved you. The full implications of that little word 'as' must have hit them like a lightning bolt after the resurrection. On the face of it, washing the disciples' feet was relatively mundane, except in those days it was a job for slaves or servants and certainly not one for a rabbi; giving up one's life for one's friends, on the other hand, was at the other end of the scale.

The reality is that while the command is on the face of it simple, in fact simple enough for a small child to understand it, what a mess we grown-ups have made of putting it into practice. Thank goodness for the Holy Spirit that gave

them, and gives us, the power to love like that. So we CAN do it, and we need to remind ourselves that quite a lot of the time we are already doing it.

Of course, Jesus, as it says at the beginning of the chapter, did love them to the end. He loved Judas to the end even in his betrayal, he loved Peter to the end even knowing he would deny him, in his impetuosity, in his getting things wrong so often.

Judas, for some reason that we can't understand, fears and rejects love. Peter loves Jesus, but doesn't understand him and wants to do things his own way, while the beloved disciple surrenders to love. In all truth we have all probably done all three at some point in our lives. Sometimes we want to be left alone by God, sometimes we are confused by what God is up to and sometimes we feel really close to God.

The thing is, loving like Jesus commanded us make us vulnerable and require us to trust, and too often we'd rather not make ourselves vulnerable or be what we feel is too trusting.

As GK Chesterton once said, The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

Yet not only is it a command, Jesus goes further and says By this everyone will know you are my disciples. In other words, love poured out freely, without reservation, is the litmus test of Christian witness. If we don't, Jesus seems to be saying, then the world won't know what it needs to know about God. I don't know about you but for me that level of responsibility is daunting to say the least.

In those two verses Jesus has moved the boundaries to make loving one another as He loved us our macro vocation, if you like. We won't be known as Jesus' disciples by being doctrinally correct or by our morally blameless lives, but by acts of loving service that point to God's love for the world.

Love is, if you like, the defining characteristic of believers. But loving others will often be a matter of will, a matter of choice in the face of evil or when we feel let down by someone we thought we could trust.

I want to turn fairly briefly to the Acts reading. Because it's good to contrast and compare the Peter of Acts with the Peter of the Gospels. The Peter of Acts

may have been slow to get it sometimes but when he got it, there was no stopping him.

In our passage today he rejects three times (where have we come across that before?) the vision of everything God has made being clean, but then he absolutely grasps the point – that God is God of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews and heads off happily to see Cornelius. As he says in his defence of his actions to the Jewish authorities. Who was I to think I could stand in God's way?

We mustn't forget the other side of the coin either. The Jewish authorities aren't excited to know the details about the Holy Spirit falling on Cornelius and his family. No, what gets their dander up is the fact that Peter has EATEN with Gentiles. As Eugene Peterson puts it in the Message What do you think you're doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?

In other words, they were concerned about their reputations. It was a reaction against change. Most of us don't like change, but what do we do when God moves the boundaries as he does here in Acts? How good are we at accepting that God may be doing a new thing? Wherever it comes from, any change that is of God will be Spirit-inspired.

Both in Acts and our Gospel reading God is doing a new thing, giving us a new understanding and in the Revelation passage John envisages a new heaven and a new earth.

As Easter people we should remember that God is not only with us but that he has also gone ahead of us. In Matthew's Gospel on Easter Day the angel tells the two Marys to tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee. When we think of our own Galilees, whether they be large or small, isn't it wonderful to know that Jesus has gone ahead of us and is there waiting for us? In my experience that takes away a lot of stress.

If loving each other as Jesus loves us in that self-sacrificial way, that servanthood way, is the big picture vocation for every Christian, how might that be played out in our individual micro vocations? That's not for me to suggest, but all I would say is that they can be seen in a surprising variety of ways.

For some it will be in their work. For others it will be the hospitality they offer, for others it might be the lonely people they visit or do the shopping for, or teaching English to the illiterate or to the refugee, or helping at a foodbank, or chatting to a homeless person in the street. And that's just a tiny fraction of the possibilities. And they are all worthwhile forms of service because they all go towards helping everyone else to respond with joy to what God has done for us.

Loving one another as Jesus loves us is the hallmark of success for a Christian, not whether we are wealthy or have an important job or a big house or fancy car.

As the Bible reminds us the body is made up of many parts, so perhaps the best thing we can do is ask the Holy Spirit to show us how we can best use the gifts we have been given to love one another. And we can encourage each other in our efforts to love one another by sharing those acts of loving kindness that we have witnessed in others.

Because loving one another as Jesus loves us is what will prompt God to say when the time comes well done you good and faithful servant.