

Easter 5 C, 2010, Barcelona St George's with Confirmations

Acts 11.1-18; Ps 148; Revelation 21.1-6; John 13.31-35

Often if you ask people about the Christian religion their answer betrays that they suspect that Christians have lots of rules to follow. The world outside the Church and even people inside the Church tend to assume that most of these rules are about what we should *not* do. The Ten Commandments come to mind. Do not murder, do not steal, do not lie, do not commit adultery. These commandments and also the sort of commandments we grow up with, given to us by our parents, are phrased negatively. Do not forget to brush your teeth. Do not chew with your mouth open. The list goes on and on. Yet despite commandments being generally phrased negatively, in the Gospel today Jesus says he gives us a new commandment. Far from being phrased negatively, it is positive. Love one another. There is nothing *negative* about this commandment.

This positive command to love motivates us to obey all the rest of the commandments, even those which are phrased negatively. You see, if we truly love God, we won't be profaning his name. If we truly love God we won't turn to worship other things. If we truly love our wives and husbands we won't be seeking opportunities to commit adultery. If we love our neighbour we will not want to steal from him or her, and certainly will not want to kill them. The negative commandments fade away in the presence of this positive one, for love is the force that helps us keep all the laws of God. St Paul in Romans 13:8 puts it this way, "The one who loves another has fulfilled the law".

This new commandment is so simple and straightforward: love one another. It is so simple that the smallest toddler can remember it, and understand it. Yet as simple as it is, we Christian disciples still struggle with comprehending the scope of this commandment and putting it into practice. What does a command to love mean? To help us understand this simple commandment and to put it into practice we need to turn to the Gospel lesson today. The Gospel read today in Eastertide is also read in the middle Holy Week.

In the Latin Bible, the phrase "new commandment" was translated *mandatum novum*, which gave its name to that day in Holy Week when we commemorate the institution of the Holy Communion – *Maundy Thursday*, *mandatum - maundy*. But also on that day when Jesus gave his new commandment he also provided a symbolic sign to help us understand what love for one another meant. And so on Maundy Thursday, we commemorate the washing of feet. The key to understanding this new commandment is humble service to each other, symbolized by the washing of each others' feet.

So this goes beyond the idea or understanding of love being about *feelings*. Jesus is not talking about warm feelings here. It is impossible for us to feel affection for some people. Even within this congregation I guess there are some people that you know you like and others that you don't. The same is true of our classmates, or neighbours, those we work with, the stranger who tailgates us and honks when we



are a millisecond too slow in moving at a green light. But it is, nevertheless, possible to obey this commandment to love even *when our feelings are not there*. We might have valid excuses for not having warm and affectionate feelings for a particular person. But it is still possible to help another, to serve them, to wash their feet. The love that we are to have for each other says Jesus, is this sort of *action-love*, not *feeling-love*. The way we are commanded to love is after the way that Jesus himself loves. That means washing the feet of people, forgiving them, even being willing to give one's life for them. And Jesus' model of love is that of God his Father and ours.

The former president of the USA, Jimmy Carter tells in his biography about sitting in a pew in Plains, Georgia, in the Baptist church where he worshipped. He was struck by a sermon title which was "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" President Carter said that question caused him to sit up and take stock of his life. We can ask ourselves that same question. As you leave this Church today, how would anyone know that you are a Christian? What evidence would they have?

At the end of the Gospel, Jesus says, "by this will everyone know that you are my disciples, *if you love one another*". This servant love is at the heart of Christian witness. It is a mistake to think that bearing witness to Jesus is only about going out into the street and preaching. Christian witness is about living this commandment of love. When I ask the confirmation candidates today if they will proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, it is this example of loving service to which I refer. The Christian Church grew very rapidly after the resurrection of our Lord, and it grew because of the powerful witness of Christian love and loving service. Tertullian, an early theologian and Father of the Church in the 2nd Century, wrote that the pagans said of Christians, "see how they love one another". The great reformer Martin Luther preached to his congregation, "As there is no fire without heat and smoke, so *there is no faith without love*".

This matter of love is a serious matter, with serious implications for our behavior and life as disciples. Sadly even the disciples of Jesus Christ around the world continue to squabble with each other over matters to do with doctrine, over decisions that churches are making. Recently at a synod meeting, not in this archdeaconry but in another, some members of one congregation decided they would not worship with members of another, because of what they feel to be wrong decisions that they have made. When people look at us behaving in this way, they must surely shake their heads and say, "these cannot be real disciples". Remember what the old Christian worship song says, "They will know we are Christians by our love".

Dear friends, ignoring this new commandment is not an option for us. We note first of all that this is a command, *not a suggestion*. Jesus is not saying to us, "I'd prefer it if you love one another", or "It would be rather nice if you could love one another", nor even "try to love one another". No. This is a *commandment*, and to keep this commandment is at the heart of living the life of a disciple. In a few



moments, the candidates for confirmation will promise before me that they will seek and serve Christ in one another loving their neighbour as themselves.

This is why St Paul warns us in 1 Corinthians, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.... If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing".

Love one another! Love our neighbours! Love the other members of our congregation! This is not always easy, but Jesus says that that's how people will know that we are Christians — that we love one another.

We disciples are called to be fellow builders of the kingdom of Jesus, and it is a kingdom based on love for each other – love for everyone in fact. Jesus doesn't pick and choose whom He loves, so neither can we. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved *the world*". The Greek word used is *kosmos* God so loved the *kosmos*, the whole universe, if you like.

William Barclay, the biblical scholar, tells the story of a group of soldiers during WWII in Italy who had lost a friend in battle and wanted to give their fallen comrade a decent burial. They found a church in a village with a graveyard surrounded by a white fence. They asked the priest if their friend could be buried in the church graveyard. "Was he a Catholic?" the priest inquired. The soldiers answered, "No, he was a Protestant." "I am sorry" said the priest, "our graveyard is reserved for members of the Catholic Church. But you can bury your friend outside of the fence. I will see that the grave site is cared for" The soldiers thanked the priest and buried their friend on the other side of the fence. When the war ended and before the soldiers returned home they decided to visit the grave site of their friend. They remembered the location of the church and looked for the grave, just outside the fence, but they couldn't find it. They went to the priest and asked, "Father, we cannot find our friend's grave". The priest answered, "well, after you buried your friend, it just didn't seem right to me that he should be buried there, outside the fence". "Ah, so you moved the grave?" asked the soldiers. "No" said the priest, "I moved the fence".

And that is exactly what God has done for us. None of us deserves a place "inside the fence" of his love, but God keeps acting in love toward us and extending his love to embrace us. That is why Jesus teaches us that we are even to love our enemies. The heart of the Gospel, dear friends, is that there is no one in the world who stands outside the circle of God's love. We mere mortals have a hard time drawing a circle as large as God does, because we are not sure that God loves all sorts of people. You might draw a circle in your mind and imagine yourself standing in it, then say to yourself, "there is not anybody in the whole *kosmos* that God loves more than he does me". But then we have to add, "and there's nobody in the whole *kosmos* that God loves *less* than he does me".

If we want to know what our love should look like we go back to that sign that Jesus used as he taught this new commandment, this *mandatum novum*, on that



first Maundy Thursday. At a certain point Jesus got up, took off his outer garment, girded himself with a towel and proceeded to wash his disciples feet. In this Jesus teaches us how we express our love for others. The example is a very practical kind of love: it is loving service, servanthood, washing of feet. Washing someone's feet is not easy – but Jesus demands a love that is often uncomfortable for us, and even untidy.

Today when we celebrate Confirmation we are celebrating that these candidates have agreed to be fellow servants of the Lord, sharing in his work of love. For this reason I will lead them, and lead all of you, in a commissioning – and it is a commissioning to live and work as witnesses and servants of Jesus. This service is about being empowered by the Holy Spirit of God to be a witness and servant of Jesus. We call these witnesses and servants, disciples. The anointing with chrism and laying on of the bishop's hand is to demonstrate visibly that the grace of the Holy Spirit is being given to you so that you can be used in the service of our Lord, in the service of the Kingdom of God, to be lovers of the world and her people, and to demonstrate that love in servant ministry.

A final story of a preacher who learned that another preacher had broken a world record by preaching the world's longest sermon. (I don't think it was Andrew, by the way!) The preacher decided not to try to break that record in case he literally bored someone to death. Instead he told his congregation that the next week he was going to preach the world's *shortest* sermon. He prayed that week and did his preparation. On Sunday he stood up in the pulpit, and said "love". One word. And sat down.