

Sermon for Easter 5 2022

John 13:31-35

A New Commandment

John chapter 13 verse 31 is the beginning of what is known as the Farewell Discourse of Jesus. From here until the end of chapter 16 He attempts to prepare the Disciples for the fact that he is going to be leaving them and to explain what this is going to mean for their lives. To put our reading today in context, Jesus has just given them a very practical lesson on just what love looks like when He washed their feet. They have shared a final meal and Judas has left to do what he must do. Just after this short passage, Peter will declare that He will follow Jesus anywhere, even to death and Jesus will tell him that before the cock crows Peter will deny Him three times.

There is so much to glean from this short passage, so much for us to learn about what it really means to be a follower of Christ.

“I give you a New Commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another”.

What does Jesus mean by love here? In our culture we tend to think about love mostly in terms of romantic love and feelings of love. As I have already hinted, Jesus is talking about loving action. Bruce Milne says, “Love is defined by the Cross”. It is love of that calibre that Jesus is calling us to express to each other! This week I went with the Archdeacon and several other clergy to visit the Darvell Community, who were kind enough to show us around and talk to us about what it means to them to live in a Christian community. The very first rule of Community that the very first Bruderhof community made was that no member of the community would ever talk about another member behind

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their back under any circumstances, not even to their husband or wife. If they ever have an issue with another member, they have to go to that person and

sort it out. I am afraid to say that the Anglican clergy looked at each other rather shamefacedly, because we were all painfully aware that this is something that we are all guilty of. Now I don't think for one moment that the folk at Darvell or any of the other Bruderhof communities are perfect. In fact David who was showing us around told us that the man who looks after the dairy herd asked a brother to help him. The brother said no, he didn't think he wanted to do that. Well then said the first brother, I hope you like water on your cornflakes! They are of course sinful human beings just like the rest of us. But I must say, witnessing the way that they put each other's needs first – every person in the community is responsible for the well-being of every other person, I think that we have a lot to learn from their example. I am not saying that any of us are being called to live together in a communal way. But we are certainly called, as disciples, followers of Jesus to live in a community of love and grace, putting each other first and not talking behind each other's backs. This is really rubber hits the road stuff. Are we just playing at this, enjoying being part of the culture of church, coming along when the type of service suits us, giving God an hour a week if he is lucky? Or are we committed to Him and to each other? Do we take Jesus seriously? Do we take Him at His word?

This commandment is not new because it is intrinsically different from the law of love in the Old Testament, remember that Jesus said that the most important commandment is to love God with all our heart and mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. And of course, he radically

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redefined who and what a neighbour is! In the parable, it is the Samaritan that is a neighbour to the injured Jew, because he showed him mercy.

The sense of it being a new commandment lies in it being the law of the New Covenant which Jesus established by His death and resurrection, just as He promised He would at the at the last supper. The New Covenant brings with it new life in the Holy Spirit which enables us to fulfil this new law of love.

There is of course also an evangelistic element to this commandment. Because Jesus is quite clear, not only must we love one another in the way that He loves us, but if we get this right, then it is how everyone will know that we are His disciples and belong to Him. Now it is easy in one sense for me – people see my dog collar and know that I profess to be a Christian. But my dog collar does not make me a Christian and no-one will know that I truly belong to Christ unless they see that I love my brothers and sisters in Christ. I am not required, or indeed able to be better at this than anyone else. This is a commandment to all of us equally. Francis Schaeffer said, “love is the final apologetic” in other words the ultimate defence of Christianity. To quote Bruce Milne again, “Unlike other associations which are based on common interest or outlook, the church is to be marked by an inclusiveness which echoes the universal appeal of Jesus. It is designated as a community which welcomes all people, irrespective of background, age, gender, colour, moral history, social status, influence, intelligence, or religious background. To love like Jesus is to love inclusively and indiscriminately.”

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Tertullian writing in the second century famously reported the pagans saying, “Behold how these Christians love each other! How ready they are to die for each other!”

Often to put another person first we have to die to ourselves, put to death what we want in order to provide what another needs. And it can be painful and costly. The Cross was painful and cost everything. Love is defined by the Cross. This is challenging and in our own strength quite beyond us. Peter in his own strength denied Jesus and ran. But a few short weeks later, filled with the Holy Spirit, He was able to tell whole crowds about Jesus.

Jesus has commanded us to love one another as he loves us, sacrificially. He isn't going to make us love one another. That is a choice we will have to make every day, sometimes many times a day. Will I talk about that person in a derogatory way? Will I put this person first? Will I go the extra mile? Will I do something I really don't want to do? We will all fail, but we can always be forgiven. If we try to do it on our own, it will be incredibly tough. If we ask the Holy Spirit to help us, then we will find that we can indeed, like St Paul, do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

So, I am challenging myself and you to grow in Christlikeness and learn to love each other as Jesus loves us!