

Easter 5 2019

“Love one another, even as I have loved you.” Verse 34.

Malcolm Guite, the priest/poet once wrote about this verse from today’s gospel.

“Here is the whole gospel concentrated into nine words. It is not simply the *novum mandatum*, the positive commandment to love, replacing all those negative “thou shalt not”; it is the second clause “even as” that is the true foundation of this love.

There is a paradox here. We cannot be commanded to love. Love does not come at command indeed command is the most likely thing to kill it. On the contrary, only love can beget love we can only love in response to being loved and only know what love is because we are loved.

This is self-evident at the natural level. Just as a baby learns to smile in response to the smiles of its parents and learns language by being spoken to, so the very possibility of love, let alone its vocabulary and gestures, can only be learned in response to the love that finds us first, finds us before we even know what or who it is that has loved us.

And so it is with us spiritually. We love as we are loved, and Jesus makes the new commandment possible because of the radical way in which he has loved us; absolutely, unconditionally, without reserve to the last drop of his heart’s blood.”

But we also love because it works. In his book, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Ernest Gordon describes a very moving incident in which British prisoners of war tend the wounds of injured Japanese soldiers and feed them. The Japanese are encrusted with mud, blood and excrement. Their wounds are sorely inflamed and they are left uncared for by their own people. The British prisoners see them, take pity on them, bathe their wounds, and give them a little food to eat. They care for their enemies who have starved and beaten them, killed their comrades. God broke down the hatred and conquered it with love. Love can work miracles and break down barriers because it is truly the power of God. St John writes, “Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God.” It works in our schools and workplaces and homes and families.

The commandment to love is for us in the meantime. It is a commandment for us as we await our final redemption. This world is not heaven but by loving God and our neighbor, we can build a little kingdom even while we wait for

God's coming rule. We can break down barriers between people – between races and genders, ages and abilities, political opinions and ideologies. We can show in our lives that we believe what we say we do – even here at St Mary's. We can be a community that loves one another, supports one another, sometimes challenges one another because we love one another.

Being rich or poor, young or old, gay or straight, Conservative or Labour, bright or somewhat slower – these are human things but in Christ we are a new creation, God's own people. We can be like the early Christians who showed their faith in the risen Christ by loving one another. They were described to the Roman Emperor Hadrian in just that way:

“They love one another. They never fail to help widows and they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to those who have nothing. They don't consider themselves brothers and sisters in the usual sense but instead brothers and sister through the spirit of God.”

Bishop George Appleton was the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. He became good friends with a Jewish professor of New Testament at Hebrew University. This Jewish scholar told Appleton that he prayed for Christians every day. He said,

“I pray that you Christians may be more like your Jesus, that your love for one another will be made more plain.”

The marks of love were plain on Jesus. He showed his disciples the wounded hands and feet and side. Even in the glories of His risen body, the marks of Jesus' suffering and love were still plain. Our love for God and our neighbour may leave their marks on us too. When we give to the mission work of our church, bring food for the food bank or tell others of Jesus – these are marks and signs of our faith. When we give a person a second chance or a third, we are showing the mark of Christian love. When we watch our cutting remarks hurt, when we behave a bit differently at work or school or with friends – a bit more open, caring, more accepting, more loving – especially of people who are different from us – then we are showing the effects of our faith.

Malcolm Guite talks about us having to love absolutely and unconditionally as Jesus loved us. That is not easy as we are human and fallible. Jesus and the apostles were celebrating that last supper together. Because Jesus was aware Judas was going to betray him, the Lord confronted him. It is an especially uncomfortable conversation that Jesus concluded by telling Judas, “Do quickly what you must do” (13:27).

After Judas disappeared from the Upper Room, Jesus turned his attention to those who remained. After a few preliminary remarks, Jesus delivered one of his more familiar teachings. “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 will have love for one another” (vv. 34-35).

It is often pointed out that the command to love one another, in and of itself, was not a new teaching. It had been a part of Jewish tradition for centuries. In explanatory comments on the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.” Leviticus 19:18 adds that “you should love your neighbour as yourself.” The call to love one another was not new to Jewish teaching and it was also present in the wider Greco-Roman world.

We cannot make a case that loving one another was a new idea; at least not in the sense that it was the first time anyone heard about it. On the other hand, it seems plausible to say the newness of which Jesus spoke was that by our love for one another we will be identified as followers of Christ to the wider world.

So, we have the command, “Love one another, even as I have loved you.”

We are called to strive with all our efforts to attempt to meet up to the challenge that faith puts before us. But then no-one ever said it will be easy.

Amen.