

## Easter 5: Love commanded

John 13: 34-5

*'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 now know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'*

When I started preparing this sermon, I went through the readings as usual, and then let them float around in my head and heart. These sentences from the Gospel stood out to me and set me thinking: what would Jesus have understood when he said this? This seemed important to me to understand if I was to follow his example.

As Jesus comes to the last part of his final evening with his disciples, he is pretty knocked about by events. Judas has just done a runner, the disciples seem to be as thick as bricks not understanding his fundamental message, competing with one another for status. He also realizes that the authorities will pick him up in the next few hours and deal with him. He has just washed the disciples' feet to try to help them understand his meaning, and now he makes one last effort, simplifying all he has said and shown. It was all down to this; copy my example and love one another as I have loved you. You do not have to be clever, or prosperous in life, just follow my example.

In his humanity Jesus was a person of his time, culture, and religion. This leaves us with the big question; what the word 'love' would have meant to a Jew in first century Judea? Jesus was the product of Jewish culture, deeply steeped in the history and religion of his ancestors and his perspective would have started there.

Over the centuries, the Jewish community had come to understand that love was the cement that held human communities together. For them, the word would have reflected a combination of different attitudes: particularly kindness, loyalty, respect, and faithfulness. It did not have romantic or erotic sense. The integration of kindness, loyalty, respect, and faithfulness together describe a different kind of love.

By their very nature, relationships of this kind within any community, go in both directions. Person A acts and person B then responds. They are established and maintained by kindness and so on to one another. Back and forth; a series of linked interactions involving various members of the local community, establishes a web of these relationships. They were a community because of this web of relationships; community was, in effect, the sum of these bonds. The quality of the community reflected the quality and number of these trust relationships. You could see this as a kind of informal covenant between all the members of the community, based on kindness, loyalty, respect, and faithfulness towards one another; that is, based on love.

It is easy to see that outsiders moving into such a situation would truly be outsiders until, through kindness and respect toward them, they began to respond in kind. As they did so they slowly became members, not outsiders.

At the same time as they came to grips with the nature of local Jewish communities, the Jews had been trying, over the centuries, to describe their experience of God. To this end, as we all do, they drew on their own life experience. They used words and images that meant something to them. In this case the web of relationships, this active human love, that was the basis of their community. Using their understanding of the reality of shared relationships between people, they discovered it was also described the divine relationship between them and God.

At the beginning of their relationship with God, during their time in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, it was like when an outsider was invited to join a community, the relationship begins through kindness, loyalty, respect, and faithfulness. Here however it was between individuals and communities, on the one hand, and God on the other. The quality of it depended on the quality of this developing relationship. Think of the ups and downs their ancestors experienced in the wilderness and later.

This new bond was initiated by God though. They were being invited to join God's community; they were not inviting God to join theirs! They were the outsiders. They were invited to respond in a similar fashion towards God in this new relationship as they had towards those who would make them welcome into an earthly community. God's aim was to establish two-way bonds of fellowship with them. As with human relationships, the more loving interactions that took place the deeper the bond becomes. The more they responded to the offers of friendship, the more they could respond in all ways in their lives. This wilderness experience and their relationship with God over the generations that followed was the basis of the Jewish nation and religion.

There is a very important point here relevant to people today. As the Jews were patiently invited again and again to respond to God's invitation, so are we all. All are invited, all can come. To call this invitation love is to recognise that this way of behaving produces a positive and deepening relationship of people with God.

As God initiates this loving relationship with us, we are drawn to respond in kind. For example, the two great commandments are not fulfilled by duty but when we respond to God's invitation with kindness, loyalty, respect, and faithfulness towards God and one another. We also see a second consequence of this deepening relationship with God. As we realise more and more about the nature of God, whose name, remember, is 'I am', we respond with a profound sense of this 'I am' whose oneness and uniqueness lay claim to our ultimate devotion. The Psalmist who wrote this morning's wonderful Psalm really got it right! : *'O praise the Lord from the earth: praise him mountains and hills, beasts of the wild, and all cattle: creeping things and winged birds: All people. Let them praise the name of the Lord: for alone his name is exalted.'*

The Jews had come to realise that the fundamental nature of God was one of kindness, loyalty, respect, and faithfulness. This was Jesus' heritage. This he had grown up understanding.

So what did he do with this? As always, he takes what is an old insight and adds new dimensions and meaning to it. He speaks of God as Father. He uses the intimate tone of 'Abba', dad, for God, reflecting a deep fellowship of trust and affection, as well as obedience between him and his Dad. The Jewish understanding of God we just heard in the words on the psalmist was suddenly challenged. For the Jews were summoned by the gentle teasing words of Jesus, not by the judgement blasts of John the Baptist or the warmongering of the Jewish revolutionaries. He proclaimed their God, the high and holy one, the creator of heaven and earth, was filled with parental love for all! As a consequence a shockingly different way of life was demanded by him from the formalism of the Jewish priests or the legalism of the Pharisees.

Jesus taught that God, as a parent, cares for all of creation: 'he makes the sun rise, the very hairs on our heads are counted'. This is not quaint poetic hyperbole so much as a tender declaration of the universal and intimate character of God. Jesus knew that, on the one hand, humankind and nature are ultimately dependent creatures; and on the other, that God is independent, self-existent, without beginning and end; and yet God cares!

Jesus recognised this as parental concern, the Lord is patient, merciful and generous. Remember the lost coin, the lost sheep. And so with Jesus' mission, he thought of it in terms derived from the Old Testament images of the Suffering Servant: he had come to seek and save the lost, to heal the spiritually sick. It was offensive to the so-called Godly that Jesus ate with tax collectors and public sinners. That he would break the Sabbath law if he could save or comfort a human life by doing so. However, at the same time he was angered by legalism and hypocrisy that stood in the way of loving care. His stern attitude reflected his compassion.

So on that last night, Jesus is asking his followers to love one another as he loved them. As he had developed a deep bond with them, he was urging them to do the same with one other. The outworking of this would show the reality of God's kingdom on earth. This call to his followers has echoed down the ages and is a call to us just as it was to them.

And now to finish we need to get practical:

There are only three paragraphs to go, and I will leave some silence between each one for us each to reflect on our own journey with God.

True life, as we have seen, consists of establishing and deepening the bonds of kindness, loyalty, respect and faithfulness in many different ways. Firstly, we personally need to respond to God's call and then to go on to establish and deepen our relationship with God. This way we can become the complete individual that lies within each of us and that God as a good parent desires for us. So, I guess, the first question we must ask ourselves is: How is our relationship with God? Has it been established? How is it progressing? Are we taking our part in developing it further? How are we doing this? Worship, prayer, study, service?

Next, how are our relationships developing within our community of believers. Are the bonds of kindness, loyalty, respect, and faithfulness continuing to grow or are there gaps: some gaps may be old, some may be new, chasms inhibiting the growth of the web of bonds between us that actually constitute our community. As Jesus said *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another"*! How can we work to heal and extend this web that is our Christian community? Kindness, loyalty, respect, and faithfulness: where are they missing? What can we do to heal these missing links, grow these relationships?

Finally, there is the outsider, those outside our faith community. We have seen that the outsider needs to be so treated with kindness, loyalty, respect, and faithfulness that bonds will grow, and they can become living members of our community. How are we acting in this task of noticing and welcoming the outsiders in Ginninderra to whom Jesus is calling us?