

Easter 6, Alderholt

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

Today is the last Sunday of Easter before we turn towards the Ascension and Christ's return to Heaven. Our readings bring us face to face with the core of Christ's teaching about our relationships with each other 'Love one another'. It is one of the most important messages Jesus gives us, it is if you like his parting message and so we rightly major on it on the eve of the Ascension. Today is also traditionally Rogation Sunday, a day for beating of the bounds of the parish, claiming it in prayer for God. In a way the two concepts are linked by the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus had affirmed the summary of the Law, to love God with your whole being and to love your neighbour as yourself and then in response to the question "and who is my neighbour?" told that parable. In other words, anyone and everyone is our neighbour but especially those in need. Rogation Sunday affirms the notion of the parish and the idea that for Anglicans there is a particular locality for which they have a special duty to proclaim in word and deed this love for one another. It is often observed in rural parishes by a prayer walk around the bounds of the parish but it can also be observed throughout the year by having a cycle of prayer for all the roads in the parish.

Now loving one another is a difficult command to obey, especially when it concerns those we live alongside and see everyday. In pre-covid times with Christian Aid week at this time of year, it might have involved us pounding the streets doing the street collection. In supporting Christian Aid we are expressing love for others but in some ways it's much easier to see television pictures of starving children in a war zone and write out a cheque and feel good about ourselves, than it is to love Mrs Bloggs next door who annoys the hell out of us for a multitude of reasons. The writing out of a cheque hasn't really cost us anything emotionally, real loving of those around us, demands much more of us in terms of time and emotional energy. But what sort of love is it that we are called to give?

Throughout history individuals have arisen who have pointed us towards Christ's brand of loving. Mother Teresa of Calcutta was one, St. Francis of Assisi another. He was extravagant in his love not only for people but for all God's creatures. Simone Weil a French philosopher who died comparatively young in England during the Second World War, wrote succinctly about this type of love. Despite her passionate love for Christ, she was never actually baptised. In this way, she said, she was able to remain united with those outside the Church and, therefore, with all outsiders. Simone's definition of love was the giving of generous attention an, "intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention". Let's unpack that...

Attention, applying focused interest, clear, unequivocal and non-judgemental. Disinterested (very different from uninterested), meaning impartial, not influenced by personal needs or concerns. Gratuitous; completely free, without strings or hidden agendas. Generous; given wholeheartedly with the others' interests at heart. This is the love, in part or in whole, to which we are called to risk applying ourselves. It is not easy, I certainly don't find it so partly because it is not natural within the human condition programmed as we are by our genes to look after number 1. But Jesus knew our weaknesses. He was fully aware of the temptations which beset us – greed, jealousy, competitiveness, anger and so on. So often he gave us teachings which allow for our frailty and fragility. His teaching was flexible offering constant forgiveness and the capacity to chose but there is no compromising on the key requirement for being a follower of Christ - the need to love one another, a need echoed by St Paul and subsequent Christian writers.

We cannot say we love God unless it is acted out and bears fruit in our love for each other and that is why I linked it with the parable of the Good Samaritan earlier, that parable arose out of Jesus stating the summary of the law. To love God with all our heart mind strength and soul and our neighbour as ourselves. In my experience it is our profound love for God which enables us to overcome come our natural selfishness and become people capable of loving our neighbour as ourselves. We are probably familiar with the famous Rublev icon showing the three persons of the Trinity sitting around a table with the circle open, inviting us into the community of love which is the Trinity. As we allow ourselves

to be drawn into that love which is at the heart of the Trinity, so we are enabled to love our neighbour as ourselves. God's love will transform us if we allow it, and this is in part the work of the Holy Spirit within us. I love the passage we heard from Acts because God refuses to do things properly. The Theologians like to insist that the Holy Spirit is God's gift to us at baptism as per the pattern of Jesus' baptism. But here the Holy Spirit falls on the good folk of Corneleus' household, so Peter and his party say we'd better hurry up and baptise them. Sometimes we need God to be a bit maverick to stir us up a bit and point us to new directions.

The sort of love that I've been talking about Jesus lived out even as his friends betrayed him by word and action and as his enemies nailed him to the cross. He tells us today that the prize for surrendering our pride and becoming as vulnerable as he was is a permanent place abiding in his love. Which means being as close as we can ever get to the Father and experiencing the ultimate joy this brings. Having experienced this love, it should lead us to want to share it, to draw others into the all-encompassing love of God. Our worship and fellowship together should be a foretaste of heaven, a life changing and enhancing experience something we want to draw others into.

Jesus never implied that this sort of loving is easy but he reminds us at the end of the Gospel that we did not choose him, but he chose us and "appointed us to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last", then repeats the command to love one another. It is not just feeling kind towards other people, nor even to like them, it is, put simply by Simone Weil, attention to others, their needs and concerns, their general well-being, promoting the good in and for others equally. It is generosity beyond the odd handout, its generosity of spirit by being patient and tolerant and forgiving.

Forgiving is a large part of it, as Jesus showed us on the Cross, in praying 'Forgive them Father for they know not what they do'. It is difficult to love those who have hurt us if we are still nurturing a grudge. We stayed in Uganda in 1994, not many years after Museveni had come to power ending the many years of bitter civil war and oppression. The Bishop we stayed with had as his Diocesan motto, 'Twagenalenka' which means

'love one another'. In his sermons he also frequently preached on forgiveness. Two messages 'love one another' and 'forgive one another' - deep profound messages which were helping the ordinary people to rebuild their lives after the horror of civil war. No amount of foreign aid could rebuild the social fabric in the same way as that oft repeated message was engaging people in their hearts, hearts torn and made bitter by the horrors of the war. We live in a society and nation disrupted by covid, divided and ill at ease with itself as the elections this week have shown. 'Love one another' and 'forgive one another' are two messages we need to share and to be bold about sharing. Amen.