

## Sarah Shaw's Sermon for Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2016 – Easter 5

Acts 11: 11-18

Rev. 21: 1-6

John 13: 31-35

Today we are reminded that it is all about love. Jesus says to his disciples just before his betrayal and arrest, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' Yes, it *is* all about *love* – the love of one who would shortly lay down his life for his friends. We also had this reading on Maundy Thursday when we re-enacted the washing of feet and commemorated the Institution of the Lord's Supper, because these events happen just before Jesus gives this new commandment. So why do we have this reading again now, in this season of Easter?

Experiencing resurrection - the defining event of Easter - as a reality in our lives *means* following Jesus into this radical movement of love. Christ visibly lives in us when we love one another. But it is not the love that grows with deep friendship, or with romance, or with the bonds that form between parent and child, grandparents and grandchildren, but love which is a choice. Love which is a decision. Love which is defined by selflessness, sacrifice, and forgiveness. Love that costs not less than everything, as we prayed in our Collect.

Back to the context in which Jesus gave his new commandment. Jesus says these words knowing what is to come. He anticipates the betrayal of his friend Judas, the denial of his friend Peter, his abandonment by almost everyone, and the agony of his impending death. Yet - he loved. And he loves *us* - and calls us into that same radical movement of love.

I was at a study day yesterday and part of it looked at what's been called 'The New Atheism,' propounded by Hitchen and Dawkins, among others. There are a number of defences which can be given against the New Atheism, and I think one that is compelling is that the New Atheism tends to focus on what people of faith *believe* – what they state in their creeds, for example – rather than what they actually *practise*. The arguments *for* atheism, it seems to me, generally miss the positive difference that faith can make in peoples' lives.

So as people of faith – and specifically as Christians –we need to show that our faith is *not* about expressing a doctrine, but living it out in the way that Jesus showed us.

And how did Jesus show us to live, and to love? Firstly, he loved us *selflessly*. His actions were all towards the well-being of others, in his healing, in his teaching, in his life and death. This selfless love is not the love that is quickened by the warm, fuzzy glow of mutual admiration, in whatever form that might take. That's what our egos dictate that we want. This is love which forgets the needs of self, and risks isolation, rejection, abandonment. Love which seeks the well-being of the other, especially when that 'other' is someone we don't warm to, someone we find strange or difficult.

Jesus also loved us *sacrificially*. There was no limit to what Jesus would give, as we know by his death. What are *we* called to give? What are *we* called to risk in our giving? In our reading from Acts, Peter risked much by eating with a Gentile. The first Christians were Jews who would have hardly entered the house of a Gentile, let alone eaten with one. Peter risked losing face at best, and being ostracised and rejected at worst. But he simply recounts what he and his witnesses saw – the Holy Spirit, God's grace, present in those Gentile believers, just as it was in the Jewish believers. He had seen the grace of God extended to the Gentiles and it changed everything. The others who had been criticising him stopped their criticism and believed too, glorifying God. Peter says 'Who was *I* to hinder God?' *Our* religious ideas, customs and rituals too, must be sacrificed, if they risk taking priority over the love that Christ calls us to.

Next, Jesus understands our weaknesses and failures and loves us regardless. We are called to love one another similarly. Love is not love if it is blind. Love acknowledges the faults of the other, yet loves. Jesus knew that he would be betrayed, abandoned, denied by his friends - yet still loved. The love of God is so deep that nothing can separate us from it – we are loved for better, and for worse. We are called to love one another in the same way.

Finally, Jesus loved us *forgivingly*. Despite all the pain and cruelty he was subjected to, Jesus forgave. 70 times 7 is how many times *we* need to forgive. And if we can't forgive, we can pray to want to forgive. And if we can't pray to want to forgive, we can pray to want to pray to forgive!! God will honour that promise if it is what we long for.

But there can be no pretence. All this is terribly hard, let's face it. Thomas Merton wrote that as Christians we have a tendency to love people *in general* rather than in particular. We love the *ideal* of unity and brotherhood. But what about when it comes to the hard choices? Caring more about someone's else interests, when we don't even like that person? Risking the things we hold dear in order to put others' needs first? Forgiving that annoying person who hurts us every time they open their mouth? Can we still love *them* for better, for worse? We must try to, we must pray to, with all our strength and only with the grace of God. *This* is the radical movement of love we are engaged in. And it is our only hope of transforming lives, situations and relationships. Because the world preaches a different message, as we know.

I've been listening to the debates around whether the UK should stay in the European Union or not. It seems to me that all that the arguments, whether for *or* against, focus on our self-interest as a country. The debate is generally centred around the buying and selling of goods with very little discussion about the well-being of people. Yet the European Union's origins were in the desire to tie Europe's nations so closely together that they would never go to war with each other again. Its origins were in promoting harmony, human rights and justice. Churchill himself described the EU as a 'structure under which we can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom.' Yet, the current debate is all about whether or not the UK would be worse off, or better off financially, if we stay or leave. It is fairly damning on our country, I think, that we appear unconcerned with our responsibilities as a wealthy country to care beyond our borders; but are rather simply concerned with the financial security of our own citizens. The evidence suggests that we are self-seeking and disinterested in the needs of anyone who is not a citizen of this country. Jesus said 'Love one another, as I have loved you'... Can we dare to speak out, can we say something radical about love, to those who have a public voice in this debate?

Today we are reminded that it *is* all about love, that experiencing the resurrection as a reality in our lives calls us to selflessness, sacrifice, understanding, and forgiveness. May our lives demonstrate that love, as brothers and sisters in this church family, as citizens of this country, and as inhabitants of God's world.