

Love one another

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 19th May 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: **John 13:13-35 (Gospel for Year C, Easter 4)**

Role Models

When you were a child, who did you want to be like? Perhaps a fictional character from the TV, a film or a book? Or a person you knew personally – a family member, teacher, guide or scout leader? Or a famous person? What did you admire about them? Did you fulfil your ambition of being like that person?

Are you like one of your parents? “Like mother like daughter” or “like father like son”? We don't always like being considered as “a chip off the old block”. “You're just like your mother!” isn't always received as a compliment.

But if someone compares us to a person whose qualities we admire, we feel complimented. I was playing jazz once in a pub in Greenwich, and someone came up to me afterwards and said my playing sounded like Ruby Braff. I had no idea who Ruby Braff was, but I've since got a couple of his records, and if I could really play like him I'd be very pleased with myself! (By the way, he was a cornet and trumpet player from the 1940's onwards, whose style was inspired by Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke.)

Disciples of Jesus

As a Christian, my ambition is to be like Jesus. And that's easier said than done. *Much* easier said than done! I can't help thinking of that famous song in Disney's *Jungle Book* film, “I wanna be like you-oo-oo”. Just as the ape, King Louie, wants to be like a man, so I want to be like Jesus. But there's hope here: “You'll see it's true-oo-oo, an ape like me-ee-ee can learn to be hu-oo-oo-man too”. By the work of the Holy Spirit within me, perhaps I can become a little more like Jesus.

So what has all this got to do with our Gospel reading of today? Let's put it in context: Jesus is addressing his 12 apostles at the Last Supper. During John chapters 13 to 16 he is trying to prepare them for carrying on when he is gone – dead, resurrected and ascended to heaven. It is they who will represent Jesus to the world. They will be entrusted with the message of salvation. They will bear witness to his truth by their words and by their lives. They are his disciples – his students. They have learned from him and now they will be going solo – although as we shall hear next week, Jesus will send them a Helper, the Holy Spirit, to be with them and guide them into all truth.

So, just as Jesus was their role model, now they are to be the role models for others. So they need to be like Jesus:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' (John 13:35 NRSV).

The most distinctive thing about Jesus' disciples, says Jesus, is that they will be known as putting into practice his “new commandment”

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. (34)

A New Commandment

I wonder if, like me, you've been a little puzzled by this phrase “a new commandment”. We don't want to take away anything from what Jesus says, and we all agree that loving other people is very important, but in what way is this a *new* commandment? When Jesus was asked which was the greatest of God's commandments, he answered that the greatest was to love God with all your heart, mind and strength, and that the second most important was to “love your neighbour as yourself”. I'm sure you're aware that in saying this, Jesus wasn't making up any new

commandments – he was just quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, two old commandments that his Jewish listeners were already familiar with.

So what's new about loving one another in John chapter 13?

The first thing is a *new context*. If you read Leviticus chapter 19, which is where “love your neighbour as yourself” comes, you will see that it is full of instructions about how the people of Israel should live together. Here are a few examples:

⁹When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God...

¹³You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning. ¹⁴You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD...

¹⁷You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

The whole thrust of the laws of Moses is that God's people, who have been redeemed from slavery, should live distinctively, embodying in their dealings with each other the principles of fairness, concern for the weak and vulnerable, and harmony between people, in a way that shows that they are a people who belong to the God of justice and mercy.

Now, at the Last Supper, Jesus applies the principle of love to a new context: his disciples are to be the new people of God; they – and therefore we, if we consider ourselves disciples of Jesus - are to live distinctively, in a way that marks us out as belonging to Jesus. And most importantly of all, we are to show our distinctiveness within the Christian family, the church. As brothers and sisters in Christ we are to love *one another*. The Church should be a beacon of light in a divided world, a community, a fellowship, a family who make every effort to get along in spite of their differences. We are called to rise above the pettiness of being easily offended by other Christians, and also above the carelessness that enables us to blurt out what we think, indifferent to the sensitivities of those who are more fragile or insecure.

Paul picks up this theme in his letters. “Let love be genuine”, he writes to the church in Rome, “outdo one another in showing honour”, “live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:9,10,15).

I know that a lot of caring goes on in this church behind the scenes, in little chats after a service, or in phone calls or impromptu visits. There are also strong personalities, and from time to time they clash. Not everyone likes the same way of worshipping, and we have different ways of going about organising things. If families sometimes fall out, we can expect the Church family to do so also. Paul's answer is to “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience” (Colossians 3:12). Jesus calls us to a deeper commitment to each other, which is based on recognising that we are all imperfect, “work in progress”, but all redeemed by the precious blood of Christ and equal heirs to God's Kingdom.

“... as I have loved you”

And this brings us to the other, even more important way in which this commandment of Jesus to love one another is new. The old commandment told us to love our neighbour *as ourselves*. The attention we give to our own needs and wishes is the attention we should give to the needs and wishes of others. But Jesus tells us as his disciples to love one another “as I have loved you.” The measure of the love we should give to our Christian brothers and sisters is not how much love we give ourselves: it is the measure of the love that Jesus has shown to us, in his incarnation and death on the Cross. “Greater love has no one than this”, Jesus will say in John chapter 15. Some of you will know this little saying:

I asked Jesus how much he loved me. “This much”, he said, as he stretched out his arms – and died.

The first letter of John puts it this way:

¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:10-12, NRSV)

That is what being a true disciple of Jesus means. I think what John is saying is that the way people will experience the invisible God is through the love of his visible Church.

Are we willing to be part of this?

Questions for reflection:

What do you admire about Jesus:

- The way he treated everyone equally, regardless of background or character?
- His ability to sense what was going on in people’s hearts?
- The way he helped ordinary people encounter a loving God?
- The way he dealt with squabbling disciples?
- Something else?

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you one thing that needs to be changed in yourself so that you can be more like Jesus. Be practical. How will you know when this begins to change?