

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12: 1-14

Psalm 116, 1 & 10-17

1 Corinthians 11: 23-26

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

A New Commandment

Maundy Thursday – I am sure you all know that the word ‘maundy’ is a corruption of the Latin word ‘*mandatum*’ which means commandment. It is where we get the word ‘mandate’ in English from.

It doesn’t take a degree in theology, or in Classics, to work out why today is called Maundy Thursday then. Jesus said, “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 have love for one another.”

You couldn’t get a clearer summation of Jesus’ ministry and mission, and an idea of what the kingdom of God is like. You couldn’t get a clearer summation of what God’s kingdom on earth will look like and what we are called to do to bring glimpses of it to our brothers and sisters, to all of humanity, on earth.

And what a challenge it is. ‘To love one another...’ Can I admit, standing here, how hard that is, how hard it can be? And I am sure that some of you may be thinking that also. Jesus left us a really tough challenge, setting such a high bar that we so often fail to attain.

To love one another – it should stretch us, it should challenge us, it should force us to stop and reflect and work out how we are to love

one another, and why we fail. And to ask, in prayer, for God's help in our self-discovery.

To love one another – yes, it should challenge and stretch us. In our personal pilgrimage through life if we want to grow in faith, to grow in Christian love and Christian action, then we need to be challenged, we need to feel where the rubber meets the road. If we are serious in our faith, we should be willing to be challenged and apply ourselves to personal growth and development. With God's help, we can take steps towards being a more effective part of the body of Christ on earth.

The new commandment implies that we and all of humanity are connected to each other, and there is a level of interdependence required in order to attain God's kingdom on earth. That should not surprise us. God's kingdom is described as a place of peace and love amongst all peoples, where swords have been beaten into ploughshares, where spears have been beaten into pruning-hooks.

And yet, despite this new commandment sounding so easy, frankly, I think I suck at loving my neighbour.

Christianity, along with all the major world religions has a version of the 'new commandment', often called the 'Golden Rule'. It invites and actively calls all of us to treat each other the way we, ourselves, wish to be treated.

However, many people struggle with their own sense of worth. We are each, quite often, our own worst critics. That voice inside our heads is often not satisfied unless it is giving a running critique of all we do, and all we have done in the past. It can be quietly nagging away, or it can be so noisy it drowns out so much else going on in our heads.

And when we are not at peace with ourselves, when we do not love ourselves, how much harder is it to love our neighbour?

The Greek word used in the John's gospel to connect 'love neighbour' and 'love yourself' is 'equals'. Like a simple equals sign in a maths equation. Just ponder that for a minute... an equals sign! Love of neighbour and love of self directly connected by an equals sign. Does this mean that one of the hurdles we face in loving our neighbour is that we do not love ourselves enough, or sufficiently, or completely?

Probably it does. Our own self-critical abilities, the wounds and scars we carry from episodes in our lives can make us vulnerable and wounded today, especially if we have not processed and managed to heal them. Our own wounds and scars can be barriers in how we are able to show God's love to others. Henri Nouwen's book, 'The Wounded Healer'ⁱ powerfully reminds the reader that all of us have been wounded in some way, and in acknowledging our woundedness we can heal ourselves and without that we will find it hard to help heal others.

Now, I am not suggesting we become self-absorbed, and that we should not be reflective and self-critical. I am saying that we need to know that we are loved by God, for as we read in that first chapter of Genesis, we are made in God's image, 'God created humankind and blessed them'. We have that amazing original blessing from God, a source of light and love that when we tap into it effectively, helps us healthily engage with what we would like to change in our being, whilst having no loathing or over-critical searching of our soul, no condemning judgment, no listing all our defects that can paralyse us from being able to love ourselves, let alone love our neighbour. Let me remind you once more what Genesis ch 1 says... We are made in God's image. God blessed humankind.

For me, walking with God, in the local hills or on camino, is where I hear God and where the over self-critical voice is hushed, where I can be honest with God about my failings, and yet still know I am loved. Our monthly Christian meditation sessions are also a great place to still the mind and feel grounded in and with God.

As someone blessed by God, made in God's image, on our own life's pilgrimage, what does true love look like then? Jesus so often modelled a form of love, agape, for all whom he met. He made a real connection with each person, he had empathy and compassion for each individual's situation, and sought to help them find the right path to their healing, to their personal salvation. Jesus did not force or coerce; he respected each person for who they were. Even the young rich man who genuinely wanted to follow Jesus but who critically still idolised his own wealth more than God, was looked on with compassion by Jesus. Jesus loved that young rich man, and I am sure he prayed that he would turn to Christ in the fullness of time. There was no hatred, only love and compassion for the young rich man as he walked away from Jesus.

We know that when Jesus was unjustly and falsely accused, he was not angry with his accusers nor with those giving false witness, and I believe he had a deep compassion for the likes of Pilate and the Chief Priests. He loved them even in their condemnation of him.

That is so hard to model in our lives. And love can seem a weak response, when actually it is often the hardest thing to do.

In our gospel reading today we read that Jesus loved his disciples to the end. That included Judas Iscariot. The gospel doesn't say Jesus loved most of his disciples... Jesus showed his love, even to the end, by teaching them to serve each other through his actions of washing their feet. Even the feet of Judas.

That is some powerful lesson for us all. It is something that can feel impossible to achieve. And maybe for most of us, it is.

As we journey through life, may we dwell in God's love and blessings, and may that knowledge enable us to love one another.

ⁱ 'The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society' by Henri J M Nouwen