

**Sermon: Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> May 2024. Leaving West Wickham**

**Acts 10:44-end, John 15:9-17**

Jesus' command to love one another is at the heart of what it means to live as a Christian. But calling it a 'commandment', as Jesus does in v12 makes it sound a bit like a rule, with little compassion attached to it and that's not what it's about at all. If you were told to love one another with no explanation at all, you'd find it difficult. But Jesus didn't give it in this way did he. No, he came to earth to show us what loving one another is about, as well as explaining what this kind of love means in his teaching.

I don't know about you, but I find it easier to love another person if I share something in common with them. They might be a family member, a friend, or a work colleague. In church, we share a faith with everyone else here, and this makes it easier to love one another.

Through Jesus, though, God enables me to love others who are not like myself. This is one of the things that marks us out as Christian and it's this love for all that Jesus is referring to when he says, 'love one another'. He has done all that love can do – he came to live with those

who were not like him, and he chose particular people, from a variety of backgrounds, to be close to him and to experience what it's like to be loved by him. He showed them what it is to 'love one another'.

But Jesus didn't require his chosen disciples to 'love one another' in the same way. No, he left them free to love him and others, or not as the case may be. He might have asked them to 'love one another', even called it a command, but he doesn't make them do this. Each one of them could have left that group of people at any time, and he wouldn't have made them return. He might have sought them out and tried to persuade them to return (and he might well have been successful ... I wonder if this did ever happen). However, he never made anyone stay.

And this is what Jesus does for each of us too. He puts in place a context in which we know what it is to 'love one another' and we are free to do so or not. This context begins with our families. A mother and father love their child, who is free to love them back in return. This then extends to the wider family and community. Whenever we see someone loving others, whether that's an uncle, a

teacher, a carer or a leader in the community, there's a context in which others will be encouraged to love in return.

Church should be the best context for this to happen in, as we all have a shared understanding of Jesus as our role model. He has acted out the greatest thing that love can do. He has come to show us what it is to love, and so to give joy, as he says in v11. I believe that's why the disciples stayed in that group – because they liked the joy that they saw and experienced in that context. Others need to like what they see and experience in our community within our churches. This is what we need to do in our churches – show love and joy to others.

This is what I have tried to do while I have been here in West Wickham: to create an environment that people want to be a part of and where they see others being loved and sharing in joy. It's been great to have had recent experiences of this – our Easter celebrations, two baptisms, the St George's Day Parade Service, and the Community Tea last week.

We also see a picture of people being loved by someone not like them, and responding by saying they want more of that, in our first reading. Peter had travelled to Cornelius' house at the request of two slaves and a soldier who worked for Cornelius. Now yes, Cornelius was a high-ranking centurion, but to associate with or to visit a Gentile (which Cornelius was) was against the Jewish law. Peter was taking a great risk and showing great compassion towards Cornelius by going to see him. And Peter's message was more than the action of going to see Cornelius, because he also told him, and all his household and friends who were there, about Jesus. Such was Peter's love, joy and generosity that everyone there experienced something of the Holy Spirit and responded by being baptised and then asking Peter to stay with them for several days. And why do you think they offered this hospitality? I suspect it was probably something about wanting to experience more of that joy and love, through understanding more about Jesus.

And, in baptism today, what we do is we welcome someone (often someone not already part of the church)

into our community. In baptism, we are receiving the candidate on behalf of Jesus Christ and accepting responsibility for their growth in faith. This responsibility is especially true now, as the family and friends of many baptism candidates don't know about Jesus themselves. However, they know a good thing when they see it. Even if we never see them again, there's an experience that people will remember which may make them approach another church looking for more of the love and joy that they found with us.

As well as love and joy, at the heart of any church should be a humility in knowing who's in charge. It's definitely not the vicar. It's not even the Church Wardens. No, it's Jesus who's in charge. In v16 of the gospel reading Jesus said that it was he who had chosen the disciples and then appointed them to go and bear fruit. And it's not we who are in-charge here in this service, or at the lunch today. It's Jesus. He has chosen us and has given each of us a personal relationship of love and loyalty, which we have chosen to live out today by being here, together with

others, some of whom we may not know. This is what bearing fruit is all about.

It's by going into situations where we may not know others, and we might be unsure about what's going to happen; that's how we can bear fruit (in terms of loving one another). And invariably we bear fruit so much more powerfully where we're challenged by our circumstances. This challenge may be reflected in a different liturgy, seeing a bible passage in a new light, or meeting new people. I've tried to do these things here in WW and I am sure that I'll be faced with further opportunities to do so where I am going to next. And I tell you what, this sharing of Jesus' love with others gives me more freedom and joy than anything else.

So, can I end by quoting Jesus: This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Amen.