

Easter V Year C 2019

If you asked most Christians what was at the heart of our Faith, many would answer that it is love. This is absolutely the case; the understanding of the outpouring of the love which is God and at the heart of all that exists, which is revealed to us in the face of Jesus Christ and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is certainly at the heart of all that I can understand of all-encompassing Love of God, because God is love.

Yet the curious thing is that if you study the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew mark and Luke) you will find scant reference to Love (or Agape) at all. That doesn't mean that it is not at the heart of what they write about, because Jesus is revealing love all the way through his journey. In fact, it is in John's writings and the works of Paul that the journeying and indwelling of Divine Love is made so clear. You will have heard me say many times that the most personal statement we ever hear from Paul is that in his Letter to the Galatians: 'I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2: 20) That really is one of those 'wow' phrases to me.

Today's Gospel takes us back to the Last Supper, at the point where Judas leaves the table to go on his journey leading to the betrayal of the person he has followed and loved. The shadows lengthen in this passage, and yet it has already offered us an example of the love which Jesus calls us to as he washes his disciples' feet. You and I know that this love which he calls us to is revealed to us in the costliest way imaginable. The cross lies ahead, and yet even here, John the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus 'loved them to the end' – the disciples – to the end. This includes Judas – that is how great a love Jesus calls us to, when he says, '*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.*' Now at this point in the narrative, this is aimed not just at the disciples, but also to the Body of Christ – the Church – you and I. and not just to each other, but to everyone we come into contact with.

So a question. Do you ever find yourself feeling as though you are falling short in the 'love your neighbour' department? Whenever we have a chronic conflict with someone in our family. the family of God or further afield; whenever we run across a someone whom we just can't help but dislike, when we are tempted to think, 'Well, God loves you and I am trying,' we feel as though we are utterly letting the side down.

The truth is that the love God offers us for each other is much sturdier than all that. It is also greatly more important to the life of the church and of the spirit than we might think. So when Jesus tells us that we need to love each other, does that mean that we need to feel all sweetness and light all the time? Absolutely not. Sweetly sentimental love may be fun to experience, but it is no more a realistic expectation of the rigours of human life than a romantic film or a Mills & Boon novel. You only need think of a parent's love for their child or the love between partners. There will undoubtedly be moments when parents or indeed partners would trade them in for a parrot! That is life, because, yes, people argue, they disagree, they hurt one another – the whole gamut of human experience. Does that

mean that there is no love there? By no means, because true love is founded in God's love, and true love is, as we heard in that passage from Revelation, like a spring from the water of life.

Love abides, manifested in different ways at different stages of our lives. Romantic love, parental love, companionable love, filial love, compassionate love, you name it. It is all love, and it all flows from the same source - from God. Love doesn't mean unconditional acceptance, either. Jesus showed us how to love, and none of His love was of the sweetly sentimental type. He loved the rich young man who could not give up his possessions to follow him. He loved his friends. He loved the disciples, even when he knew they would abandon him. He wept when Lazarus died. He even loved the very people who crucified him - he asked God to forgive them as he died. He loved the outcast, the sinful, the hectoring, the slow, and the untrustworthy. And he always told them the truth, and he had very little patience with the traits that held them back from God, and he didn't tolerate dishonestly or abuse or disdainful looks.

So loving can be a struggle, but remember that we are never alone, because God is there in our inmost being, willing and longing to journey with us in exploring the way we express love within the world. Sometimes that will be in struggles we have in loving ourselves. Yet we are loved so deeply!

We heard from Revelation one of the most visionary and beautiful in the New Testament: *And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.*

That Holy City is not some unattainable dwelling – Jesus has come to us and transforms us by his love. We, then, through the choices we make being God's people in the world help in our own ways to bring heaven to earth. This is the reason the Church exists – the Holy City prepared as a bride for Jesus. But the Church is an empty vessel without the love and mercy of those within it, and God knows that it is not perfect. It never has been and never will be, yet within the context of this frail vessel, you and I are called to love each other because the Lord says, *'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'* That's sometimes difficult, but we have a head start knowing how much God loves us.

Neither is it a coincidence that this command of Jesus takes place around the table. Our gathering around the table week by week has always been at the heart of Christian worship; a sign that through our communion with the Lord we are strengthened by his love; fed and reminded that we are part of the Body of Christ. We are also strengthened to go into the world to reveal the Divine Love as we touch other people's lives so that, as Teilhard de Chardin, the great French philosopher said: **Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered fire.**



The Washing of Feet - Sieger Köder 1925-2015

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely, I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'

John 13:31-35

When he [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." 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.'