



6th May 2018
Psalm 98
John 15.9-17

Down to Earth Love

Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen

In some of the TV versions of *Oliver Twist* there is that famous scene in the Workhouse when Oliver asks for more. The Beedle is amazed that anyone would presume to think that more was on offer. Dickens is describing the pitiful and often abusive way the poor of his day could be treated. As if to highlight the irony of charity being administered so grudgingly there is a text from the bible above the Beedle's head as he punishes Oliver for his impertinence, it says: God is Love.

This week we return in our Lectionary reading to John 15. As Jesus speaks with his disciples he moves on from talking in those word pictures all about us abiding in the True Vine and now offers a commandment – that we love one another.

Just a few chapters earlier in this gospel we have heard Jesus talk of giving us a new commandment – one that sums up all the commandments, that we love God and neighbour with our whole heart. Later in the first letter of John we have that text found in *Oliver Twist*, from 1 John chapter 4 verse 8: God is love.

So there is little doubt that John thinks of God in this very positive way. Not as an angry deity to be feared, one who might rule by inducing guilt – but as a God of love. So, he talks of the love between God the Father and God the Son, and the sort of love that might grow and flourish between all who are seeking God and wanting to purposefully live in the image of God.

Yet, maybe, we are just a little surprised to hear Jesus 'command' love. We get the word 'Maundy', as in the Thursday of Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, from the ecclesiastical Latin *mandatum*, - which comes from the text earlier in John when Jesus gives a new commandment - a mandatory instruction

To our twenty-first century ears that may seem a little bit like an oxymoron to speak of love as a command. Isn't love spontaneous and freely given? Can you really command it?

Well, I suspect we shouldn't get too hung up on the way Jesus is speaking here. In his Jewish tradition faith was often expressed in terms of keeping The Law.

At a recent Beyond Difference meeting that brought together in Chesham a Jewish, Muslim and Christian speaker on the platform, the Jewish participant began his talk by saying his faith was, in its own way, quite legalistic.

Giving a law is about setting up an ideal, a standard, a corporately held aspiration. And that's surely what Jesus is doing here. For him 'love' is fundamental both in our relationship to God and with each other.

Our task this morning is to ask: What kind of love is Jesus speaking about here?

Perhaps we have lost the sense of wonder in this discourse as Jesus calls us friends. That's an amazing, mind blowing statement!

In that Ancient Near Eastern first century world a relationship was normally defined in two categories. The first was the formal, patron-client connection. In this scenario there is hierarchy, duty, obligation and even control. This was the relationship between master and slave, householder and servant.

The more informal and mutually reciprocated relationship was call 'Fictive-kinship'. This was the friendship of companions.

So here, in John 15, Jesus says: I have called you friends.

The Quakers still use that term to describe themselves today.

Our Psalm this morning is one of six coronation psalms which portrays God in kingly splendour and there may be times when we find that a helpful and inspiring image – it was certainly there in the song we sang together before the children left.

But here, in this teaching from Jesus, those trappings of majesty are put to one side. Jesus speaks of loving us as friends and of us loving one another in that companionable way too.

Now, rewind just a couple of verses back and we read in verse 13: There is no greater love than this, that someone should lay down his life for his friends.

It's upon verses like these that we can build up our definition of love – that in the life of Jesus it was a 'cross shaped' love.

This is a self-sacrificing love. I appreciate the way the Pub Vicar, Dave

Tomlinson describes it in his book *Black Sheep and Prodigals*, that some of us read at AFC last year: The cross speaks of vulnerability more than anything else: the abandonment of ego, winning by losing and love given without measure.

Just think about how the Jesus story could have gone.

A wandering rabbi with a radical message tours the country. He speaks up for the poor. He reaches out to the marginalised and heals those for whom many have no time as they pass by on the other side.

He's challenged by the religious hierarchy of his day because he's rocking the boat, disturbing the equilibrium, the compromised peace many have negotiated with an occupying power.

In the light of those robust conversations, this Jesus of Nazareth, tones down his message. The radical slowly turns into a compliant member of the establishment. Eventually he's even given a seat on the Sanhedrin and as he does so the poor are still overcharged in the temple courts, women are still stoned and the people still stoop under the heavy weight of religious legalism.

But, that isn't the Jesus story is it?! This isn't the way Jesus loves. Because Jesus turned that love into a search for justice. He didn't compromise that love or tone it down.

One of the commentators I read this week, I thought, put it beautifully by saying: *justice is the shape love takes in society.*

I think some ways Jesus didn't have to say anything in his defence as he stood before Pilate, for his whole ministry was eloquent. In treating us as his friends he showed the sort of love that manifested itself as a new kind of radical justice: he healed those with a dreaded skin disease living outside the village boundary, he took tea with tax collectors and shown them a different way, he stood up for the poor by overturning the tables of the money changers.

And for that way of living and that kind of loving – and because he wouldn't stop striving for that kind of justice – he lays down his life for his friends and is crucified.

But that's to look forward in this gospel to the cross. How about if we look back a few pages to chapter 13 when Jesus washes his disciples feet? For this is another way of defining love – it's bowl and towel love.

Our passage today is part of what we call Jesus' Farewell Discourse. The final, and in some ways, most important things he had to say. And in John's gospel, as we approach the cross there is a surprising omission. We don't explicitly find the

Last Supper in John. Look for the origins of Eucharist in the fourth gospel and you won't find it.

It's intriguing maybe to ponder that if this were the only gospel in our sacred scriptures we perhaps wouldn't be receiving communion this morning – instead, we'd be washing one another's feet! Foot washing might have become for us the central sacramental practice of The Church because it's message, by Jesus in John 13, was one of servant love.

Nothing, it strikes me, could be more down to earth than washing our neighbour's feet.

And isn't that the essence of what Jesus is teaching us here. Love isn't about grandstanding and shouting about ideas, it's about rolling up our sleeves in service.

It's hard love. It's tough love. It's committed love.

That's the way Jesus loved – bowl and towel.

I've been thinking of a way to end this sermon. Maybe an illustration from church history of someone who loved sacrificially.

Then it came to me that I just have to look around us – as we have gathered here in Amersham this morning. Here in church we are sitting alongside folk who have loved families unconditionally, remained faithful to friends, given their all to tasks of service both inside and outside the church.

The message from John this morning isn't that we should start loving this way – in a practical, down to earth manner - but that it should be a continuing feature of our person lives and a consistent characteristic of our corporate one.

It's the way Jesus loved – sacrificially. It's the message of the cross.

It's bowl and towel love.

May it be our love, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 3rd May 2018