# John 13.31-35

I Corinthians 13.
18th May 2025

## The Quest for Love

Introduction to the Theme

In church, in a few moments time, we are going to hear the words of Jesus from the Bible, which are sometimes known as his greatest commandment. He is talking to his disciples, and he says: Love one another as I have loved you.

Jesus didn’t only talk about love; he showed us what it looks like by the way he loved people – the way he treated people with kindness and compassion. So, in a way, he says *copy me…as I have loved, so you must love too.*There is a super word, often used in Africa, in places like Zimbabwe and South Africa, that we’ve printed on today’s notice sheet. It’s the word UBUNTU. Shall we have a go at saying it together…UBUNTU.

Now, a lovely African church leader called Archbishop Desmond Tutu loved this word. He reminded the world that it was a Zulu word and that it could have a great Christian meaning, rather similar to Jesus command for us to love one another. Archbishop Tutu said Ubuntu means *I am, because we are.* We all live together in our families, churches, schools or communities. So when one person is happy many of us share in that happiness, and when one person is sad, we all feel part of that sadness too. Ubuntu says we are all interconnected.

I heard a lovely thing on the radio last week, it was part of the morning service on Radio 4. It was a school choir singing a song that had the line *You…me…God loves us.*

The thing that struck me was that they didn’t put themselves first and sing: *me…you…God loves us,* but rather *YOU..me…God loves us.* The song put others first.

UBUNTU does the same. It never sees life just from our point of view, it always puts our family, our friends and our neighbours in the frame. It’s a great way of living out that great command of Jesus who says in today’s reading *As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*THE SERMON
Minister: Let the words of my mouth
**All: And the meditations of all our hearts**
Minister: Be acceptable in your sight
**All: O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen**

We talk about love so often in church. Yet we all know talking about something isn’t the same as doing something! So, my guess is that all of us find today’s gospel challenging, even uncomfortable. We’ll spend a lifetime going back to John 13 verse 34 and the words of Jesus: *I give you a new commandment, love one another, as I have loved you so you are to love one another.*Many years ago now when one our boys was under the weather and, taking him at his word we thought it best he skip school that day, I had no option but to take him along to a church committee. I mean he was no problem, he just sat in the corner with his Gameboy (or whatever device it was in those days), but, of course, he did listen in. On the way home, in all innocence he asked a question that sort of broke my heart, he said: *Dad, why did that man who spoke a lot hate you all so much.* It was, in its own way, a profound observation. Without making all the allowances that come with age and a lifetime of attending church committees, he heard it for what it was. A member of that committee who spoke too stridently, too harshly, too dogmatically was heard by a seven-year-old as a member who seemed to speak with hate instead of love.

I often reflect it’s never only what we say that’s important, but how we say it. Emails are the worst in this respect because you can’t always know if they are written with a smile or a grimace!

In a recent Poirot film a character blurts out: *The writer of Corinthians got it wrong. Love isn’t kind, it keeps records of wrongs, it isn’t patient, and it certainly doesn’t endure!*Well, I loved the film but I don’t agree with that line, in fact I hope none of us in church this morning do!

It is possible, with God’s help, for love to be kind, for it to keep no record of wrongs, to be patient and endure. Indeed, I can’t imagine what my life would have been like if I hadn’t been blessed to live it in company with people who have loved me just like that.

That’s why I was so glad after another church committee, (you see, my life is just full of them!), which was a real antidote to the one I’ve just told you about. Like the first one it had a few choppy moments – that’s a euphemism, of course, to say there were disagreements. A lady was there who was trying the committee out and I thought, that’s it, she’ll never come again after tonight. So, next morning when I received a phone call from her telling me she’d like to join the group I heard myself saying: *really, but wasn’t last night’s meeting so awful?*

No, she said. I really appreciated that even though there was disagreement you all spoke with honesty, and it was obvious that even though it was hard you were trying to stay together and find a way forward. I’d like to be part of that she said.

So, today’s gospel isn’t for the faint hearted. It’s Jesus’ Golden Rule: *Love one another, as I have loved you.*And the manner of Jesus way of loving didn’t please everyone, not least Judas Iscariot. Indeed, this passage is set at the very moment Judas finally breaks ranks with the others and slinks off into the night to betray a leader who, I guess, he just thought loved too much. So, doesn’t Judas’ reaction teach us that the Way of Love isn’t always the most popular. Sometimes people want a harder, even crueller way and it’s sad , but true, that some of the worlds most popular leaders have been thought ideal because they talk strong and act with harshness.

So, let’s be clear, today’s passage, it’s not a suggestion but a command, *love one another as I, Jesus, have loved you.* Well, it’s in the wonderful stories of Jesus that we learn how our Lord loved. And these incidents, whether it's Jesus making time for families, reaching out to the margins, offering second chances or weeping over injustice or death, are not just descriptive but prescriptive. *As I have loved…in my story…so you are to love…in yours.*

That’s the challenge and just because we are talking about love this morning it in no way means that any of this is easy, but then in life the best things rarely are.

G.K.Chesterton once said: *The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It’s been found difficult and left untried.*And maybe it’s sometimes us Christians who leave this central tenet of our Faith untried. We’ll accept forgiveness, we’re grateful for the hope of heaven, we’ll bring our intercessions, but when it comes to loving, and loving like Jesus we can think of a hundred and one reasons why that’s not for us and is just too tough. I don’t mind baking a cake for the bazaar, or even writing a cheque for the Christmas appeal, I’ll turn up and sing the hymns and even do my slot on the rota, but love like John 13 verse 34 asks me to love? Love like Jesus?

Well these were clearly important words from our Lord because they are among his final ones and last words usually go deep.

To even have the slightest notion of two thousand years of Church History we might be forgiven for thinking the final words of Christ might have been: *build an empire, insist on doctrinal purity, make sure the boundaries are secure so we know who’s in and who’s out.* But that’s what we’ve said – it’s not what Jesus said!

He took up a towel and washed the feet of his disciples. He died upon a cross because he would not cease and desist from advocating the plight of the powerless. He spent his life serving and he used his last words to speak about loving. And yet so often we have failed to see, and we have neglected to hear.

In all of this Jesus taught us a language of love. We might celebrate love in words and with music, yet it is to be practiced in deeds and actions. And we can all do this. A mark of our faith will not be how many books on prayer we have read, how many conferences on evangelism we have attended, but rather how much time we might have spent alongside a neighbour in need or the effort we have put into encouraging a family member.

And this loving goes from the mundane right through to the heroic. From the ordinary to the extraordinary. Just like Jesus’ love.

When I think of the ordinary, I think of my grandfather. He never once said he loved me, never once! His generation just didn’t speak like that. Yet when I was a baby he drove 75 miles every week on his day off to visit us. When I was a youngster he paid a monthly subscription for me to receive a set of Junior Encyclopaedias, as a teenager I walked on Sussex clifftops every day of the holidays with him as we talked politics and world events for a couple of hours, when I became a young dad it was my grandfather who held the hands and smiled reassuring at my own children, and at every Induction of mine to a new church, until he died, he was always there on the front row encouraging me to take the next step. He never ever said he loved me, but in the language of love we all understand he never had to. His actions made him into one of the most loving people I’ve ever known. He loved in the ordinary things of life – and that, ironically, is so very special.

Yet, this ability to love can rise, when needed even to the heroic.

Father Joachim Alexandropoulous was an Orthodox Priest serving on a Greek Island in World War Two. One day the Nazis arrived and asked him to write a list of every Jew who lived on the island – of course he knew very well why they wanted that list - the next day, they told him, they’d be back to pick it up. They returned as promised, and he gave them the list, it had just one name on it, his own. No wonder that Father Joachim is honoured in the Holocaust Museum in Washington.

We need to practise love every day – and just maybe, what we learn about love in those ordinary times will stand us in good stead when we are called to love in moments for us that are challenging and extraordinary.

From the mundane to the heroic – love calls us, God calls us, Jesus calls us and says: *As I have loved, so you love too.*Indeed, here’s how Elizabeth Johnson, a Lutheran pastor, missionary and professor serving in Africa puts it as she reflects on today’s text: *It is not by our theological correctness, not by our moral purity, not by our impressive knowledge that everyone will know that we are Jesus’ disciples. It is quite simply by our loving acts – acts of service and sacrifice, acts that point to the love of God for the world made known in Jesus Christ.*So, just a thought to close with.

What’s our response to Jesus’ call to love? To run away, or maybe turn the page from John 13 and see if John 14 is a little easier? Well, I don’t suppose you’d be the first to say the bar’s too high. I can’t love like Jesus, can I? Really, would that ever be possible for anyone?

Actually I think you’re probably right. None of us can. The call is never to be perfect. The call is to a longing. A longing that I can do better and love deeper. Such longings are what discipleship is all about. They are part of our questing and searching, driving us to seek a more loving, kinder and genuinely more compassionate future.

Jesus’ call never fades to *love one another as I have loved you.*

So, maybe we could rewrite that passage in the Poirot film I mentioned at the start and say: *The writer of Corinthians got it right. I want to strive for a love that is kind. I long for a way of thinking that keeps no record of wrongs. I so desire to be patient. And I’ll pray every day that I might live with the sort of love that endures.*
And in such questing, with God’s help, may our love grow to be more and more like the love of Jesus. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 13th May 2025*