

# As I have loved you

a sermon preached on the

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

by **Fr David Moore**

parish priest

Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-5; John 13:31-35

Precisely what is the love which Jesus commands?

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."<sup>1</sup>

Most would agree that here is the heart of the matter. Certainly, only those who lack an essential humanity could fail to apprehend the unquestionable truth of the statement. Everyone, except the de-humanised and the lethally-damaged, can agree that love one for another is the highest ideal. Christian faith reinforces this command at every turn – in baptism and confirmation, in ordination, in the sacrament of marriage, in the sacrament of reconciliation, and most especially when we bread the bread of life and drink from the one cup of suffering. So I'll 'take it as read' that none of us is going to disagree, that the one essential and common call which is universal to us all is the command to love one another.

But what exactly is that love? Well the development of a moral life requires that in the first instance it is bound to take expression in external, measurable good works – acts of charity, compassion, almsgiving, peace and justice making, social endeavour of every kind – just being polite, decent and civil might be a good start for some! I suppose we ought not to be surprised that this is the success of Sunday School religion. And it *is* a success, in the degree to which it can be. Yet do such good acts, worthy as they may be, really express the fullness of the love which Jesus commands? Indeed, is it even possible that such seemingly-loving acts might actually stifle the fullness of love which Jesus commands?

This is a very hard question to face – it's a painful thing to face up to the ambiguity of what we may regard as our acts of love for others. But any person, bringing even a modicum of honesty to bear upon their actions, can observe such ambiguity. We all know that it is possible to do things which may *appear* to be loving for others, but which are actually motivated by a self-centredness rather than pure love for the other. We all know about this, if we are honest with ourselves. All too often, our acts of love merely serve to draw attention to ourselves, or to bolster the need we have to regard ourselves as loving and caring. To my great shame, I can easily make a very long list of all the things I have done for others which actually served my own need to appear to be loving and caring.

Part of the problem is that such externalised acts of love can be photographed, so to speak, turned into marketable images and products, traded upon in the service of promoting persona and image. And most of us have been on the receiving end of what is presented as an act of love towards us but which is actually quite oppressive. In the history of the church there are too many instances to name when what Christians have described as an act of love has actually been violent, lethal even.

Thus, the nature of the love which Jesus commands cannot be defined by worthy actions – essential though such acts may be to a humane society. Love for one another cannot be simply

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:34

external acts, because these are always at risk of being relentlessly commodified in a market culture where competition is the prevailing logic – we are even capable of competing with each other to do good works!

So what, precisely, is the nature of the love that Jesus commands? The answer lies in the second half of the statement: "*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*" As I have loved you. Love, in the most complete sense, is defined by the manner of Jesus' love. Immediately, this reveals a clarity beyond sentimentalism and competitive do-good-ism. According to the gospels, Jesus does perform good deeds, acts of charity and healing. But this is neither what makes him the Christ, nor is it the essence of his loving. Those who only see the good deeds are those he himself describes as having missed the sign. <sup>2</sup>

When we ask the question, where do we see most clearly the nature of Jesus' love we do not turn to the acts of healing – even though they are accurate signs, pointers. Jesus' love for his disciples is to be most clearly seen in a detachment from everything that he himself must have desired for himself – including, and especially, his status as the chosen one. The essence of his love is this: his conscious, voluntary self-emptying; his non-violent confrontation with the powers; his detachment from all things material as well as ideological.

Thus, to love one another as Jesus has loved us is to no longer be driven to mere externalised actions – no matter how laudable or important these may be. True, we must begin with good deeds – for good deeds have their proper place. But the love of Jesus for his disciples does not consist in good deeds. Doing the "works of God", which Jesus says constitutes 'belief in him', <sup>3</sup> is loving in the manner that he loves. In fact, Jesus demonstrates that a moment comes when good deeds themselves are to be abandoned altogether – the good deeds themselves being relinquished in favour of a complete self-emptying.

This is a truly shocking *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangelion*, gospel – especially to those of us who are addicted to doing good deeds, who have a vested interest in needing others to see us as a person of loving good deeds. For when Jesus consciously chooses to cease doing good deeds the crowd turns lethal – for that is what crowds always do, seeking only their fill of the bread, they will always turn on the one who stops supplying it to them. It is reasonable to assume that if, on trial before Pilate, he had whipped up a mighty big visible deed, the crowd would have made him their king there and then.

However, in stark contrast to the kingship the crowds have in mind, Jesus declares that his "hour of glory" has come. <sup>4</sup> The 'hour of glory' is the hour of open-eyed, conscious self-emptying. Love one another, *as I have loved you!* The disciple is not greater than the master. By water and Spirit we are people of Easter faith. The way of the baptised must be the same way as the master – the way of a love which voluntarily, consciously abandons even the good deeds which we think we need to do for the sake of our self-image.

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

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<sup>2</sup> John 6:26  
<sup>3</sup> John 6:28-29  
<sup>4</sup> John 13:31