

## Commandment

13 5 12

God our redeemer,  
you have delivered us from the power of darkness  
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:  
grant that, as by his death he has recalled us to life,  
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy

My text is from the gospel according to St John, chapter 15 and verse 12: **‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you’.**

It should come as no surprise to realise I love preaching. My first sermon, lost in time, was as Fresher at the University of Southampton back in the autumn of 1969 in a small Baptist chapel in the New Forest. But though I love preaching, there is a limit to what a sermon can achieve. I can only say so much at any one time which you can take in. Like a good meal, a good sermon is something that should leave you with room for more.

My text from St John forms part of the Jesus’ teaching on the night of the Last Supper. It is probably the climax of his teaching, the essence of the gospel. At the heart of the good news is the injunction to love; the imperative **to love one another as I have loved you**. And my sermon, necessarily brief, poses this question – ‘What are we being asked to do when Jesus tells us we must love one another?’

Love is, as you must know, a word that has a wide range of meaning from loving chocolate to loving your soul mate. In this case, the Greek for love is *αγαπε* (agape) – spiritual love and though there is a real distinction between spiritual love and physical love, *ερος* (eros), both words share a real passion to want the best for the object of our love.

So what is love ? To my mind, one way of looking at love is to think of it as an attitude of mind, to consider love as our disposition towards someone, what we feel about them, how we think of them. And the key word for me here is respect. Okay, I know respect is a word that is or was used among young people as a cheerful greeting, embodying what young people desire: acceptance and good standing amongst their peers, their friends, those they mix with. The word respect captures something of the informing principle of love. If we respect someone, then we value them, we think they have real worth. We would not abuse anyone that we truly respect. Real respect is to treat someone with dignity, acknowledging and recognising that they have true worth. For the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, people were holy in that they were ends in themselves and not a means to an end. Here I think he is telling us something quite profound. That we should love someone not because he or she gives me what I want but because they are worth loving for what they are, not for what we can get out of them. But I also think all people are holy in the sense that as God's creation, made in the image of God, people are reflections of the wonder that is God, the physical embodiment of how much God loves us.

Okay, so if to love someone is to respect him or her, valuing them because they are worth valuing, because they have real dignity and because in one sense of the word we are all 'holy', then what does it mean in practice to love someone ?

So how long have we got ? A lifetime ? We do need a lifetime to learn what it means for us to put the principle in practice, to practice the commandment which is our text today that we **love one another as I have loved you'** But in the context of today's sermon, we've only a couple minutes left. So let me be content with simply pointing to the principle then leave you guys to work out what it means to put the principle in practice.

The principle is best expressed in a verse from Matthew's gospel which the evangelist places at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. It is a verse known the golden rule and a verse that we should know off by heart because it should inform our heart and thereby our actions. Our pew Bible, the NRSV, translates Matthew 7 v12 as **'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you'** – in other words, treat people as you want to be treated. This revolutionary thought is life-changing and would, if properly practised by us, herald in the golden age. Those who exploit others are informed by selfishness, a short-term winning strategy. But ultimately a time will come and the best and wisest of us know not how soon when we will need others and God-willing, they will be there for us because in their eyes we are worth it.

So let me end with this thought: Jesus tells us clearly what we should do: we should **love one another**; and the principle behind putting that love into practice is that we treat others with the same respect we want for ourselves.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

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H: Sermon 25: Commandment

