

If you love me...

John 14:8-17; Acts 2:1-21

It was impossible not to be deeply moved by the coverage on Wednesday and Thursday of D-Day events in Portsmouth and in Normandy. To see Forces veterans, around three hundred of them, taking part in commemorative events; and putting a number of things in our world into perspective. Called by many 'the best of all generations', these men and women were not plaster-cast heroes and heroines, but in a time of international need and crisis, they stepped forward, some willingly, some reluctantly, to do what was necessary.

Amongst the many things that struck me as I watched and listened to them was the ordinariness of them. These were not generals and admirals. These were ordinary sailors, soldiers and aircrew who, in their late teens and twenties, volunteered or were conscripted to do their bit for the war effort. With all the hopes and anxieties, bravery and fearfulness that make up every other ordinary human being. To see them return to the Normandy beaches and battlefields and bridges that left indelible marks on their lives forever was both humbling and inspiring.

To hear them speak in their own unscripted words of why they did what they did, and how, despite what they witnessed and endured, they carried on, was breath-taking. I loved the old man who said he hadn't told his wife he was going off for the D-Day commemorations because she wouldn't have let him go; so he 'just nipped out the back door.' In his nineties! Or the two paratroopers in their nineties once more jumping from planes to land in Normandy fields.

So many different countries were involved in the D-Day landings. So many different languages, but one common purpose. Alongside the British and the Americans and Canadians there were Norwegians, Belgians, New Zealanders, Australians, South Africans, Poles, Czechs, Danes, Dutch,

and Greeks; nor should we forget French forces, and the French civilians in Normandy who had to endure the Allied bombing that would only ultimately bring them liberation.

So many different languages; one common message.

It reminded me of the day of Pentecost, the time when the Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire, and the many people present started to speak in different languages, but doing the one thing, praising the mighty works of God. So many different languages; one common message.

When Jesus was still with His followers, they were anxious that He might not be with them forever. It's an anxiety that continues to this day. What happens when Jesus, the founder of the community, is no longer around? Is the community left on its own, with no access to His presence or transforming power? Just fifty days (that's what the Greek Pentecost means), fifty days after the death and resurrection of Jesus the anxiety returned. Jesus was now gone. What should they do? How would they survive? Who would lead them? What should they say? How were they going to fund themselves? What should their plans be? Frightened, ordinary, uncertain, ill-equipped in their own eyes. Jesus promised, and delivered on Pentecost the promise, that God's Spirit would come.

Not absolving followers of Jesus from responsibility; not removing the need for commitment; not cocooning them from all the ills and woes of life; but reminding them that God remains present, whatever the trouble, whatever the change, and that our response is to step out in faith; not as heroes, but as ordinary people doing our best, and, when called upon, doing even more than our best because we have been inspired. Who have we been inspired by? Jesus. "If you love me..." Jesus said; "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

It is one of the most personal things that Jesus says to His followers. But He says it. If you are in a relationship of any kind, one of the most affirming, unsettling, demanding things that you can ever be asked is "Do you love me?" Too often in our culture love is understood as a soft sentiment. That's not a good basis for human relationships. Love is a freedom that paradoxically brings responsibilities. When Jesus says, "If you love Me..." He follows it up immediately with, "you will keep my commandments."

Not only to His first disciples, but His disciples today. "If you love Me, you will keep my commandments." Be prepared to squirm. Lord knows I'm uncomfortable enough asking it. Do you love Jesus? Do you follow His commandments?

It is not somebody else Jesus is asking. It is not the person in the pew in front of you, or the one behind, or the person on either side. It is you. Today, right here. Right now.

A story is told about Phillips Brooks, a C19th hymn writer. We know him best as the author of the Christmas carol 'O little town of Bethlehem.' On returning from a trip to the Holy Land to his home in the United States, Brooks was asked at US customs in New York if he had brought back anything he needed to declare. "No, just a few new religions", he replied. "That's all right," said the customs official, "there's no duty on those." Brooks thought to himself ironically, wouldn't that be wonderful for uncommitted people: a religion, that required no duty.

"If you love Me, you will keep my commandments", says Jesus.

The point of Jesus' question, and the point of the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, is to form and sustain a community of believing, obedient people. A community that is confident in following Jesus. A community that responds by demonstrating visibly the faith in which they believe.

A community which, when asked to support their Church, Jesus' Church, with their time, their talents, and their money, does so and keeps on doing so. Every minute for mission asking you to help out; every stewardship letter asking you to consider increasing your giving to the Church; every invitation to attend an event that will support others; every possibility to invite someone along to something we do in Jesus' Name to share His good news, and to show that we believe; every opportunity to support one of the many charities associated with our congregation. That's what a response to Jesus expects. "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." Not hectoring or frightened into belief, but responding in faith to Jesus' invitation to love.

In this challenging time for our church, and believe me it is a challenging time for us financially, the invitation to review giving, and to support the core things that make our church the glorious family of faith and service that it is, could not be more pertinent. It is always that way in the living Church of Jesus. Right from the very beginning, on that first Pentecost, women and men of no

great background and no great resources felt inspired to respond to Jesus' invitation because they knew they had to do something.

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." What an encouragement Jesus offers us! What an opportunity for us, ordinary as we are, to make a response to Jesus He gives to us today.

Speaking during the D-Day commemorations, Harry Billinge a 93 year old veteran remembered his 18 year old self on Gold Beach, part of the first wave of troops to land. He said, "Don't thank me, and don't say I'm a hero. I'm no hero. I was lucky, I'm here...My generation saved the world, and I'll never forget any of them." Inspiring doesn't begin to cover it.

Inspiration comes to different people in different ways and at different times, as does our duty and responsibility to be of service to our families and friends, to our community and country, and to our Church. It's time to save our Church for the future.

Jesus of Nazareth, our Saviour and Lord, asks of us in our day, and on behalf of the community of faith He came to shape that very simple question, 'Do you love me?' If you do, then you will do His commandments. He needs you. His Church needs you. What next?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen