

**Love one another**

*John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18*

The American Christian writer Brian McLaren says that, “The human story is a tale of people in motion. Anthropologists tell us that our ancient ancestors lived in southern African some two hundred thousand years ago, but it didn’t take long before many began migrating north, eventually crossing into the Middle East. Some then migrated west across Europe and others moved east across Asia. That was just the beginning.”<sup>i</sup>

The Bible tells a story of humans on the move: from hunter-gatherers in a garden to nomadic shepherds with their great patriarchs and matriarchs, to settle farmers with tribal chiefs and warlords. From there humans transitioned to life in city-states, and from there we became uneasy citizens of jostling kingdoms and colonising empires.

Exodus and Exile are two of the main story lines in the old Testament, tales of a people in motion. That story is about the deeply human tension between settling down and moving on.

Jesus was perpetually in motion, leading His disciples from town to town. He was always on the move, never settling down. His first words were, “Follow Me”, and His final words were, “Go out into the world!” “Jesus, we might say, was a migrant messiah, and the Bible is a book of migrations.”<sup>ii</sup> Humanity has always been a group of wayfarers and pilgrims, on the move.

When it comes to the way we live our faith, it is not our status, it is our trajectory, not where we are but where we’re going, not where we stand but where we are heading that will matter.<sup>iii</sup> The call to Christian discipleship is a call to get going, to move forward.

Of all the most radical things about Jesus His unflinching emphasis on love is the toughest. Love was the greatest commandment. In our reading this morning, Jesus tells us that it is His new commandment, that we love one another. It is the prime directive of who and what we are as Christians. We are to love God, self, neighbour stranger, alien, outside, outcast, even our enemy. We look at Jesus and we see this consistent and challenging model of love.

Love takes priority over everything.<sup>iv</sup>

God's love is completely non-discriminatory. God's love is gratuitous. Beyond our limitations and discriminations and partiality, love, Jesus says, is the true perfection, the true maturity towards which we should aspire.

God's love goes beyond cliché. It is a tough love. God's love has to do with mercy and compassion. God's love rattles our judgement and narrowness by insisting on reconciliation. God's love is about non-violence, kindness, community, solidarity, friendship, even basic humanity.

In the life of Jesus, story after story makes it clear that His driving motivation is a life of love.

*"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

Christianity, if it is to mean anything, be anything, do anything in our world today has to be marked by this migration to love. It sounds obvious, but how consistent are we in the practice of being loving as Christians?

If you love someone, you want to understand them and accept them as they grow and change. Loving yourself involves a never-ending process of self-understanding and self-acceptance through life's ups and downs. To love one another requires us to be bigger people in our emotions, in our world view, in our thinking, as well as in our hearts. It requires us to see something of ourselves in the other person. It requires us to see something of God in the other person.

Which is why loving one another is so hard, and why we so often fail at it, and need to return to it. But the love ethic of Christianity never goes away.

Jesus called His friends not only to love others as they love themselves, but to love as He, Jesus, loves them. That is what is new. The friends of Jesus are called to share with one another, to serve one another, to serve one another in simple acts of loving and caring, never judging or condemning but forgiving.

Jesus had already shocked His first disciples in that upper room by showing them what servant love looked like when He knelt down and washed their feet. He shocks them, and us, even more by spelling out how we are to love. Love one another.

Which is what makes being a Christian still, to this day, hard.

Does He really mean we have to love him, or her, after what they've said to us, after what they've done to us?

Does He really mean we have to love this person whose lifestyle choice, whose social awkwardness, whose professed values and world view is so very different from ours? I try to watch Question Time on the BBC, to see what views are being expressed on issues of the day, and I'm struggling to love the panel, let alone the audience! "Love one another."

I used to listen to the Today Programme on Radio 4; but starting off your day by shouting at the radio when some politician, commentator or presenter says something that drove me up the wall is not a great start to a day. Radio 3's Breakfast programme is so much easier when all you have to do is to love the music, not the chattering humans on Radio 4. "Love one another."

I'll be at the General Assembly next week, with sister and brother Christians from around the country and world, and you should hear some of them on the big issues of the day facing the Church! "Love one another."

As you sit here in Church, there will be people you find hard to love, and there will be people who find *you* hard to love. As you go home the same will be true. As you go to work, or school, or university, or to one of your groups or organisations or charities, there will be people you find hard to love, and there will be people who find *you* hard to love.

It is precisely in those places, starting here this morning in Church, that some of our hardest and most essential work must be done if we are to bear witness with integrity and become known as vibrant human beings who, "love one another." The writer G K Chesterton said, "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly." Are there some earth-bound angels in church this morning, struggling to flap their wings and get off the ground because the 'love' part of being a Christian is really hard? There's certainly one in the pulpit, even with the advantage of being six feet off the ground and closer to heaven!

The truth about the love commandment is difficult to speak and hear as we think about what it means to love one another in tense and troubled times. Where can there be love for the Russian soldier, shooting unarmed Ukrainian civilians in the back? Where can there be love for the Israeli

Police who attacked, or retaliated, during the funeral of Al Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Aqla, whose killing in the occupied West Bank has caused so much anger, and whose coffin was almost dropped on the way to her burial? Where can there be love for Parliamentarians who accuse poor people of not being able to cook for their families while budgeting on pennies a day, and deny that Foodbanks are in growing use across the country; or who say that the growing number of fines at Downing Street parties during lockdown is a non-story? “Love one another”, says Jesus. Maybe we can’t love everyone, but maybe, just maybe, this week, we can start with one or two; and when we default mode to judgement and condemnation and exclusion, we can say to ourselves, quietly but forcibly, “love one another; love one another.” And not give up to readily because it’s too hard. If we can do that, then any one of us, every one of us will display the genuine sign of being a friend of Jesus.

His commandment to love one another is not merely a strategy for survival. It is also a way to build and expand the Church, the community of faith. And I think, somehow, it will improve our health, physically, mentally, spiritually.

Love one another. Give it a try. Don’t give up.

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

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, p ix

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, p x

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid p xii

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid p 46