**John 13:31-35**

**The commandment to love**

Last week, we thought about that amazing encounter between Jesus and Peter on the beach by Lake Galilee, where Jesus re-commissioned Peter to ‘feed his sheep’: to show love and compassion and pastoral concern for those who were in need.

 And, as we thought last week, that is a commission that rests on each one of us to varying degrees because each one of us is called to a life of love, and care and compassion: to support, encourage and help those who are feeling frail and vulnerable and to stand with others in their pain.

 And this reading we’ve had this morning is the perfect complement to last week’s passage because it goes to the very heart of what it means for us to follow Jesus. Here, Jesus sums up Christian teaching in a couple of short, simple sentences: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.”

 At the end of the day, when all the doctrine has been debated, when all the traditions have been lived out, when all the hymns have been sung and the liturgies read, we are left with just one thing: love.

 It’s all about love – in the final analysis, love is all that is important.

 Whatever else St. Andrew’s Church is about – it must be a place of love: where people encounter the love of God for them, where people feel loved and accepted for who they are, without judgement, where people are free to express love for others and back to God.

 It’s all about love.

 And when Jesus gave this commandment to love, it wasn’t at a random time in his ministry: the timing of this statement by Jesus was so important. Because Jesus gave this teaching to his disciples the night before he was crucified; it was his final teaching to them before he died, so he wasn’t going to waste time telling them stuff that isn’t important.

 Instead, he goes to the heart of the Christian faith and is saying to them, “Before I die, this is what you really need to know: love one another…”

 It’s almost as if the three years of his ministry had been building up to this moment and he was saying to them, “In conclusion, this is what you need to remember…”

 It’s all about love.

 But there’s something a bit puzzling about this commandment because Jesus starts off by saying: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another…” Why did he say that? There’s nothing new about love. Love has been around since the beginning of time. And love wasn’t even new as a commandment: in the Old Testament, God had commanded people to love one another. In Deuteronomy 6:5, the command had been given to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength…”

 So why did Jesus call this a new commandment? Has Jesus got this wrong, or is there something else to notice?

 I think the answer is in the rest of the sentence: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. As I have loved you…”

 That’s the new angle on love – that we are to love as Jesus has loved us…

 We must be careful how we use this word ‘love’. It has such a wide range of meanings, doesn’t it? I love my job, I love Pink Floyd, I love chicken madras. I love writing songs, I love my iPad. But the word ‘love’ means different things in each of those contexts, of course. Love is a changeable word – it’s meaning alters according to the context in which we use it. So the definition of love that is given here is really important: “love one another, as I have loved you”.

 OK, so what does that love look like? What does it mean for us to love one another as Jesus has loved us? How are we to live out the Christian faith as a lifestyle of love? I think there are three main characteristics:

**1. Love is sacrificial**

At the very heart of the Christian faith is the fact that Jesus died on the cross; not some empty, meaningless, failing type of death, but a death that won a significant victory over the power of sin and death so that we could live in a beautiful relationship with God.

 But, of course, that death was immensely sacrificial. Jesus had to give up everything so that we could live; to give up his birthright, his power, his majesty, his glory, his own life. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul had written that “Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a slave…” The ultimate act of self-emptying so that he could show sacrificial love towards us.

 There was no limit to Jesus’ sacrifice – because there was no limit to his love for us. In truth, Jesus didn’t just *make* sacrifices for us. He *became* a sacrifice for us…

 And so the fact that we love God and love others is a response to that. In another part of the Bible, also written by John, we read that, “We love, because he first loved us”. Christ has shown sacrificial love to us and, as a response, we model sacrificial love to others.

 I wonder what that means in your life and mine? How can we show truly sacrificial love towards others? What can we give of ourselves – who we are and what we have – in order to love better? Christ is the model for us to follow and we have a lifetime to work out what that means for ourselves.

 So first, we love one another sacrificially.

**2. Love is unconditional**

Jesus didn’t die for us because we deserved it. He didn’t die for us because we had somehow earned God’s grace and love. There is nothing that you or I have ever done that has made us deserving of a relationship with God. Instead, as the Bible tells us, he died for us even when we were far off and lost from God.

 The fact that you and I constantly make a mess of our lives is not any reason for God to withdraw his love from us. Jesus didn’t set conditions on his love. He never said that we need to do something first in order for him to love us. He never waited until we had proved ourselves worthy of love. Jesus’ love was absolutely unconditional.

 And that’s just as well – because we can never do anything worthy to earn his love.

 Some people seem to have an unreasonable expectation of church - that it should be full of holy people, almost perfect and with lives completely sorted. And, of course, when they see that the church is full of ordinary people - frail, broken, vulnerable and just as susceptible to messing up our lives as everyone else - they get disappointed and even say that the church is full of hypocrites! But the church isn’t full of hypocrites, of course. It’s just ordinary people trying their best to live life in the truth and knowledge of God.

 As for me, I constantly mess up and get it wrong. I make a mess of relationships and responsibilities. I make a mess of myself and my own head on a regular basis. But the good news is that God’s love is unconditional and he accepts me back time and time and time again, despite the mess I make of things!

 The good news is that I am not the good news: Jesus’ unconditional love is the good news!

 And because Jesus loves us unconditionally, despite our weaknesses and failings, so we are called to love others unconditionally too.

 I think in this day and age, in the UK as it currently is, one of the most beautiful and precious gifts we have to offer is gentleness. We need gentle people. We need gentle Christians. This is becoming such a harsh and judgemental society; where we immediately think the worst of everyone, where we are quick to judge, where we blame those on Benefits for being too lazy, where we accuse migrants and refugees of taking our jobs and homes, and those in authority for being too selfish, where the motorist in front goes too slow, and the next-door neighbour too noisy, and the young people on the streets too violent and anti-social. Society is slipping back into a harshness and a judgmentalism that is sad and aggressive.

 But we are called to a different way of living. We are called to gentleness and non-judgmentalism and a showing of unconditional love to all those we know, even the weak and vulnerable; and those who make a mess of their own lives. After all, that is what God has done for us: he is gentle with us, isn’t he? God doesn’t bear a grudge or give us a hard time for messing up so regularly, and we should follow in his footsteps by treating others with the same gentleness and patience and kindness as God has shown to us…

 So, this new commandment to love means sacrificial love and unconditional love.

 And finally,

**3. Love is practical**

What are the greatest examples of love you can think of?

 We might think of some great poems and sonnets and love songs that have been written that express the emotion of love. But in reality, love is intensely practical. The hospice nurse caring for the dying patient. The mother clearing up her child’s sick in the middle of the night. The Foodbank staff listening to a client and providing for their needs. The parents who sacrifice their own dreams for the sake of their children. These are examples of love – love that is intensely practical…

 And Jesus’ death on the cross was intensely practical. It wasn’t a glorious chapter in his life; he was alone, he was in pain, he had to grit his teeth and just get on with it. That is practical love in action.

 And we too are called to practical love: to meet the needs of others in pragmatic ways that speak of love and care and compassion. We can’t walk by on the other side of the road. We are to meet needs wherever and whenever we can.

So Jesus has a new commandment for us: not a new commandment to love but a new commandment to love one another as he has loved us. Sacrificially, unconditionally and practically.

 That is the life we are called to. It is not easy – but love must be the hallmark of our church and our own lives. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, if we don’t have love, we are nothing, our worship is empty, our hymn singing is empty, and all the activities of this church are empty and meaningless.

 It’s all about love.

 Sacrificial love.

 Unconditional love.

 Practical love that is worked out in kindness and gentleness and patience and hospitality.

 And we pray for ourselves that, as time goes by, we may increasingly model ourselves after the example of Jesus and fulfil the commandment to love as he has loved us.