

Easter 5: John 13:31-35

St Mary Magdalen's, 2/5/10 (Sunday before general election)

In the year 1647, at the end of what is called the first civil war, Puritan generals were engaged in negotiating with the defeated King Charles I to produce a new constitutional settlement in England. Despite making progressive demands concerning social justice, their proposals retained the right of the lords and the monarchy to veto the decisions of the House of Commons. Firmly opposed to such a compromise, the New Model Army elected representatives – or agitators – to put its case and, over two weeks at the beginning of November 1647 – debates were conducted in St Mary's Church Putney which mark a watershed in the growth of democracy and popular representation in this country.

The radical Levellers, who drove these debates, were convinced of the equality of all men. Yes, men, we might note, not all people – there was still much progress to be made. But their views on equality were not based on political philosophy or abstract ideology, but on the plain reading of scripture. The Son of God himself comes among his people as the incarnation of humility and love, and he commands his followers to love one another as he has loved them.

“I give you a new commandment. Love one another, even as I have loved you.” This morning's gospel reminds us that we can never know

our Bible too well. The verse I have quoted is one of the most familiar of all gospel verses, and rightly so. But familiarity is not always safety. We know it more or less as I quoted it. “I give you a new commandment. Love one another, even as I have loved you.” But we might translate it, I give you a new commandment in order that you love you another, just as I have loved you so that you love one another.

What then, is new about this new commandment? The command to love is the basic command of the Jewish law. There seems to be nothing radical being said. After all, here in John 13 we are not even being told to love our neighbour, we are being told to love one another. Christ's words to the disciples are his words to the church. There is nothing new about love, we might think, but we have only had half the story. Jesus gives the disciples a commandment that is genuinely new, first, because they are to love one another just as he has loved them, and second, because he has loved them so that they will love one another.

Love is something active, something provocative which brings out all sorts of strange things in us. It is surprising, challenging, and unsettling. Genuinely to love another, to want what is best for another's sake with no thought for ourselves, is something which we are not very good at, and so when we do feel the power of our ability to love, it is something

disconcerting, something we do not understand, something we cannot seem to control. The love of God has all these characteristics. The grace of God, the ability to do better than ourselves, is something which allows us to surprise ourselves, to rise above self and selfishness to see the need which is beyond. And that flow of love is the very life of God himself. Christianity proclaims that God has fleshed out his love for us by becoming flesh, by becoming a human being. The eternal life of God is love, the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit for one another. But this love is so great, so generous that it overflows for us in creation and in our redemption. The generosity of God's love is so powerful that it is literally fleshed out in Christ: God became human, that we might become divine, that we might learn to love as he loved us.

On the final Sunday before a general election, you might have been expecting a political sermon. This is not it. But there are a few things which as Christians we ought always to remember where elections are concerned. The first is that it was theology which drove those Putney debaters to argue for the rights of common people. The New Testament got there long before the revolutionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The second thing to remember is that the right to vote is one which the majority of the world's population does not enjoy, and it is not something which should be ignored or lightly passed up.

The final thing to remember is that the Christians who argued for parliamentary government were objecting – on New Testament grounds – to a system which preserved the rights of the powerful and the privileged. The love which Jesus commands his disciples to give is the love modelled on his – the abasement of power and glory so that self-giving can transform the lives of others. All Christians should vote asking themselves how best we can use the privilege of democracy to transform the lives of those who are genuinely in need. And in the wider scheme of things, not many of us here this morning fall into that category.

Our gospel reading from John gives us part of the Last Supper, and how does that supper begin in John's gospel? By Jesus, taking a towel, wrapping it around himself and washing his disciples' feet. This is Jesus, the Messiah, the miracle worker, the man who speaks for God, and what does he do at this climax of his life: he humbles himself. He washes his friends' feet; he gives himself up to betrayal and crucifixion, in the actions which begin the drama which is the passion and resurrection of our Lord.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the love of God, because it is the life of God lived as a human being. Love fleshed out. The

commandment to love one another is new because the love of God has become, if you like, new. Not that the eternal life of Trinitarian love has changed, but that the world has changed because this love has become part of its own creation, has identified itself with the weakness and the loveless-ness which so often characterise humanity. God has taken humanity and drawn it up into love, so that it can never be the same. We are to love one another by imitating this miraculous outpouring of self-giving love, and we are able to do so because, as Karl Barth put it, God has chosen to be God for us.

Our gospel began with the words, “Now is the Son of Man glorified.” Jesus says this in response to Judas’s departure – betrayal is inevitable, arrest is at hand. And now, at this point, the Son of Man is glorified, because now he can complete the offering of perfect love which he will make to the Father, and into which he draws us at this mass. The drama of Holy Week and the joy of Easter can lead us to locate love in the former and power in the latter. God loves us on the cross, and defeats death in the resurrection. But it is the love of God which is triumphant this Eastertide because Jesus is nothing other than that love fleshed out, the incarnate life of God. God became incarnate, God chose to be God for us, in order to transform the world, and we must play our part – however small – in that same transformation. If you have a vote to use

on Thursday, please use it, and please use it prayerfully.