

By your love ...

John 13³¹⁻³³ / Acts 2⁴²⁻⁴⁷, 4³²⁻³⁷ /

An old fable tells how different instruments tried to master a piece of iron. The stone began and his blows fell heavily, but its surface became more and more pitted and it finally gave up before it was split in two. The glass slither came next with its very sharp jagged edge and relentless teeth worked until they were worn down or broken. Finally the heavy wooden mallet had a go and its head flew off at the first stroke. Despite all their efforts, the iron remained hard and untouched. Then the flame curled gently around the iron, embraced it, and never left until the iron melted under its irresistible influence. Like the flame love can melt the hardest of hearts; it can cleanse the most impure of metals and it can soften the most unforgiving of attitudes. That is why, as a part of the community founded by Christ love is not just our goal, it is our life blood, our bond and our brand. We are first and foremost 'the people who love one another.' I want to take a first look at this the defining mark of the Church but before we do let me review some of the things we've said about Church so far.

We've said that Church is distinguished first and foremost by its worship. We are a **worshipping** community. If that sounds like a cop out we reminded ourselves that this was always a costly exercise. The early Church was forbidden many times to worship. Its leaders were arrested, jailed and often killed because they continued to worship and in the Roman Empire for at least 300 years it was illegal in many places to worship the God of the Christians. So if we think it's a tough to get up and go to Church these days let's remember what it was like in the beginning!

We also reminded ourselves, however, that the Church is on a journey which is not finished yet. God is not finished with the Church and we have some way to go. We can still afford to learn more about what it means to be a Church and we can even learn from our fellow human beings who are not in the Church and we can do so because God, says the Bible, **is also in the world**. He loves the world and sent His Son to save that world and if this is the case then we can assume that something of God's work and vision is to be found there. We cannot 'right off' the world around us and we cannot imagine that we have nothing to learn from the world. God does not and neither should the Church. The Church is essentially a place of transformation, a place where we are transformed for the sake of the world. **But if this is true then we must be prepared also to be transformed**. God will expect us to lead the way. So what is the nature of that transforming work? How are we transformed?

To answer that question we need to return to what has been called the defining mark of the Church. We find this in our reading from John today and the mark appears to be quite simple. Jesus says this...

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13)

In two small sentences Jesus not only defines the essence of what it means to be Church – we are a community of love – but He also illuminates the most effective activity of the Church - the key to most effectively influencing the world He has come to love on behalf of the Father. And what is so fascinating is that it begins... **with us!** If we will love one another we will show the world not only **how** to live but also **what to live for!** And the key is to be found in our quest to truly 'love one another. '

But love is a problem isn't it. A minister was speaking to a Sunday school class about the things money can't buy. "It can't buy laughter and it can't buy love" he told them. Driving his point home he said, "What would you do if I offered you \$1000 not to love your mother and father?" Stunned silence ensued. Finally a small voice queried, "How much would you give me not to love my big sister?"

And take the Hollywood version of love for example. There seem to be two sorts of movies to watch these days. One sort characterises humans as incredible lovers, indeed, as people consumed by love and all the issues surrounding love. The other sort of movie characterises humans as people who have no option but to shoot their way out of trouble. The one thing both have in common is that whom you love and who you shoot are very much determined by factors seemingly beyond their control so they '**had**' to love and the '**had**' to shoot. In short, love seems to be in short supply and, at the very least, it's a terribly hard thing to find. It has a mind of its own. When and where it strikes seems to be quite beyond our control. We've become captive to the very romantic notions of love inherited from an earlier age. The world seeks love in many places and, too often, simply cannot find it there.

Jesus, however, seems to defy this kind of view of love. He seems to assume that we have a significant choice in the matter and that we should apply that choice to a certain group of people – namely, each other. In other words, we should **choose** to love one another. This turns out to be rather fortunate because as G K Chesterton was fond of saying, '**The Bible tells us to love our neighbours, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.**'

The truth is love is both a command and a choice. Indeed the command implies the choice. There would be no need to command us if we had no choice in the matter. But the fact that we have a choice means a command is required. (A note to you budding philosophers – notice that the fact of our freedom here implies the need for restrictions on that freedom – the two are not at all inconsistent with each other. God's commands and, indeed, even His laws need not be an affront to human freedom but may turn out to be a corollary of it.)

So we are faced with both a command and a choice – **to love**. And not just to love anyone but to love **each other**. Do this, says Jesus, and you will be incredibly effective in reaching the world. Do this and you will fulfil the great commission. Do this and you will be – **the Church!**

Why do you think this might be? Why do you think that loving each other will so radically influence those outside the Church? What is it about a loving community of people that is so

influential? Is it just the feelings this might invoke in those looking in from the outside? Might it be the sense of security and joy such a community would call forth? Or could it be the peace that clearly existed in such a community? All these are the very real fruits of such a community and all might possibly contribute to the effectiveness of such a community but I want to suggest to you today that the real power in such a community lies beyond the human, material, emotional influence of such a community. Let me explain.

If we look again at this verse in slightly closer fashion one thing becomes increasingly clear. **What is revealed in our love isn't so much our goodness but God's character.** Jesus says...

³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13)

What will they know? They will know that we are the disciples **of God**. How will they know this? **Only if what we do and are actually reveals God to them.** And it must do because Jesus doesn't talk about sharing the Gospel or the 4 spiritual laws at this point. He simply says – love one another and everyone around will know you are mine. And if they know this then they must know God. **The Christian community living together in love reveals God!** This is where real power will come from. This is where real healing and real awe will come from. Remember that passage in Acts when the people round about the new Church began to witness what was happening...

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. (Acts2)

The 'everyone' in this passage refers not just to the Christian community but to all who heard the words of Peter – to all those who were witnesses of what God was doing. This then is the great challenge to the Church. We can build great buildings that glorify God, we can mount wonderful campaigns to spread the written and spoken knowledge of God, we can launch ministry after ministry **but if we fail to love one another it will all miss the mark!** And I'm afraid to say our reputation appears to be quite the opposite. Mark Twain used to say he put a dog and a cat in a cage together as an experiment, to see if they could get along. They did, so he put in a bird, pig and goat. They, too, got along fine after a few adjustments. Then he put in a Baptist, Presbyterian, and Catholic; soon there was not a living thing left.

When Henry Stanley went out in 1871 and found Dr. Livingstone, (remember: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?") he spent some months in his company, but Livingstone never spoke to Stanley about spiritual things. Throughout those months Stanley just watched the old man. Livingstone's habits were beyond his comprehension, and so was his patience. He could not understand Livingstone's sympathy for the Africans. For the sake of Christ and His gospel, the missionary doctor was patient, untiring, eager, spending himself and being spent for his Master. Stanley wrote, "When I saw that unwearied patience, that unflagging zeal, those enlightened sons of Africa, I became a Christian at his side, though he never spoke to me about it." I would say that

David Livingstone served in that dark continent out of love; love for the Lord and love for lost souls. HIS WAS A LABOR OF LOVE. Praise the Lord!

And the fascinating thing about this is that the world, whether it admits it or not is looking for precisely this kind of love. The world is constantly asking a deeply theological question and it is one which is reflected in movie after movie **'What does love look like?'** And the deep spiritual significance of this question is that behind this lies a quest for God, for the world's spiritual home, for someone who will redeem the world and bring it back to its true meaning and goal. And somehow the world understands that this quest for love – even if it denies the Spirit time and time again – is a quest for God. You hear it in the songs, in the slang, in the movies of the age. Where is love? What does it look like? How will I know when I find it?

But let's finish this morning with a song from the 80's. It's a song I'm sure many of you will recall. I play it because it sums up the cry of the world and it should remind us of what our true and most fundamental calling as a Church is. Next time I preach I'm going to draw out from the book of Acts what love did look like back then when it first took form in the Church. And I'm going to ask how that might inform us today in regard to how we live both corporately as a church family and as individuals and family units within the Church. But let's finish with this...

(Song "I wanna know what love is...")