

A new commandment John 13:31-35

St Paul's Rondebosch, 24 April 2016

NRSV

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, ^[a] God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Outline

Why a new commandment?

What is the nature of this love? As I have loved you?

Why will this be the visible mark of a Christian and evidence of the people's faith?

What does it mean to/for us as disciples 2000 years later?

Why a new commandment?

If this is a new commandment what was the old one?

Leviticus: 19:18 Love your neighbour as yourself.

In what way is this the new? In other places where Jesus speaks of Old Testament laws he often deepened the meaning. Loving as he loved them was presumably more than loving a neighbour as we love ourselves. It would be sacrificial love. Later in this same discourse at the Last Supper before his arrest, he again in Chp 15 ,that same supper, spoke of loving one another as he loved them and this time added that they were his friends and that the greatest love a friend can show is to die for them.

We see the context of these words placed by the writer here, right after Judas has left the table, at which Jesus shared the bread dipped in wine with him despite intuiting his intention to go and betray him; and it comes just before Peter, in contrast, swears to stick by Jesus even to death.

In fact, 12 hrs later he would be deeply ashamed in his failure. And that day too, Judas would commit suicide when he actually saw the consequences of his tip off to the temple police.

But in Peter's case his failure could be redeemed. And then later we see, as in the Acts reading, him much further down the road, at a cross roads in fact. He was defending to the Jerusalem church leaders that he had brought a whole pagan Roman household to faith. This was not of his evangelistic zeal. Quite the opposite, he was resistant, but nonetheless followed the instruction via a vision from the Holy Spirit and the request of Cornelius the Roman leader.

This was the beginning of the church becoming inclusive of all nations and cultures.

Jesus said to his disciples love one another as I have loved you.

What is the nature of this love - 'As I have loved you'?

When we think of the group and if we tried to contemporize them we understand that even in their time with Jesus before his ascension, they were a remarkable group. He would have loved each of them uniquely and yet somehow moulded them together into a united team. Not that they did not have some squabbles and one-upmanships.

We had two pairs of brothers who were fishermen. We often think of them as poor and simple. In fact recent excavations in the last century have revealed a house that may well have been that of Peter and Andrew's family – a substantial place. And at a time of drought when the water reached unusual low levels a fishing boat from millennia ago was excavated and it too was not something a very poor person would own. Nonetheless it was a hard work and if they did not catch enough they would lack enough tax money and enough to keep their equipment in repair.

Then there were two brothers also from Galilee, James and Jude, sons of Cleophas and Mary of whom Judea least was also a fierce nationalist (Zealot). Matthew may also have been their brother. Which would have brought opposing politics right into their family.

Matthew or Levi, who was a tax collector. This was a despised role. He was seen as selling out to the oppressors and being part of what oppressed his people, the heavy burden of the Roman taxes.

There were also Simon ad Zealot and Judas Iscariot who came not from Galilee but Judea, and may have been more educated. It is suggested that he too was fiercely nationalistic and betrayed Jesus when Jesus seemed not to be activating the sort of national redemption from the Romans that he hoped for.

This mixed bunch was taught by the lived experience and visible example of Jesus. The experienced how he held them together, and dispelled competition between them, and served them in ways that embarrassed them as he was their superior.

Why will this be the visible mark of a Christian and evidence of the people's faith?

Jesus makes plain his call to the disciples. "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples -- when they see the love you have for each other"

And indeed that was so.

There is a phrase that is so familiar. It says "See how they love each other". I was sure it was a scripture but it is not. It is a quote from one of the early church fathers, Tertullian.

At no other time in the history of Christianity did love so characterize the entire church as it did in the first three centuries. And Roman society took note. **Tertullian** reported that the Romans would exclaim, "See how they love one another!"

Justin Martyr sketched Christian love this way: "We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies."

The Epistle to Diognetes, c. AD 130

only one copy survived the centuries. We do not know who wrote it. It was originally written in Greek. A magnificent description of Christian living in what was expected in the early church community.

For the Christians are distinguished from other people neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.

They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all people and are persecuted by all. They are poor yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of and yet are justified; they are reviled and bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honour; they do good yet are punished as evildoers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners and are

persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

To sum it all up in one word -- what the soul is to the body, that are Christians in the world.

So finally:

What does it mean to/for us as disciples 2000 years later?

So if Christ were here today what would he say to us? "A new commandment I give to you..." His tone might change. We might think, "Here it comes. Here comes the hard part, the complicated part...beyond everything that Moses commanded and all the laws we already have to remember, here comes Christ with more to do."

But Christ simply says to us, "Love each other."

Peter repeated it for us to read in [1 Peter 4](#), he says, "Love each other; share with and care for each other; serve each other."

Yes love each other as Jesus has loved you.

How has he loved you? What have you discovered in life about the love of God?

It is a tough love. It is not a sentimental sweet thing.

Peter talks about this new commandment, he points out something very important: we are told to go the extra mile; we are supposed to go above and beyond the ordinary. As some might say, "Kick it up a notch!"

Take your love to a HIGHER level.

Stretch your hospitality BEYOND what you usually do.

Serve each other BETTER than you treat yourself.

For Jesus, love did not mean a sweet sentimental feeling. It meant action. It meant actively loving -- putting one's love into real world activities. And yet he does this with a sense of tenderness and mercy. He knows the struggles we have uniquely and those we share, in this century in this nation, in this world. But as we experience his compassion, he asks us be compassionate likewise; as we experience his provision for us, let us be generous; as we experience his guiding and growing us, let us lead and help others to grow into all they were created to be.

And may our generation of people look at the church as say. "Wow, look at them. See how they love one another!"