

We find ourselves in our Gospel reading today for the second Sunday in a row, seated at the Last Supper with the Disciples listening to the words of Jesus. The last supper has a huge significance in John's gospel – this one event in Jesus' life makes up nearly a quarter of the entire Gospel.

The main themes of the passage that we have heard this morning, and indeed of the whole last supper narrative are love and obedience.

The love of which Jesus speaks is the Greek word *agapé*. This not the physical desire of lovers, neither is it the love which binds together members of a family. This is the love of God for his people. The creative love from which the earth was formed in its wondrous variety and which breathed life into living things. It is the sacrificial love which took Jesus to the cross and the life-giving love which raised him from the dead.

"If you love me" says Jesus. If you love me not as lovers, not as family but in the way that God has loved you, completely, creatively, sacrificially, in a way that gives life.

And obedience. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments". This is a strange one when you think about it. How many commandments can you remember Jesus giving? This is not the obedience required of slaves whose masters say to them "Do this" or "Go there". Jesus' commands are far more simple – Love God, Love other people. Simple in the saying that is, rather more difficult in the carrying out.

And the commandments are, to love. You cannot say that you love Jesus if you do not love God and other people. Of course we won't always get it right, there will be times when our love falls short, but if

we profess to love Jesus and that love isn't visible in our interactions with other people, then we are not telling the truth.

In response Jesus makes a promise "I will give you another advocate" or in some translations a comforter. Sounds rather nice doesn't it? A comforter – sounds rather like one of those blankets that children carry around with them. Familiar, warming, nice to sleep wrapped up in. But this advocate, this comforter is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is no cosy blanket, no companion to sleep. The Holy Spirit comes as wind and as fire to stir us up, to strengthen us and makes us bold and ready for action. That advocate which Jesus promises will see us on our feet, out of our comfort zone and stepping boldly where Jesus bids us go. If you fancy a life of sleeping peacefully, wrapped up in a cosy blanket, being a follower of Jesus is not for you.

In two weeks' time we will celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit as promised by Jesus, often called the birthday of the Church. The Church which was founded at Pentecost and which you and I are inheritors of today. The Church which is us, the people of God, gathered, scattered, in medieval buildings and brick bungalows, on Facebook and Zoom. Those of us who share the name of Jesus and profess to love him.

But if this current lockdown situation has caused me to do anything, it's caused me to reflect on the Church. This group of people. Peculiar and precious in the sight of God. Striving in our mission to... to what? To grow, to witness, to flourish, to survive?

As the Church we seem to spend our time trying to get others to join us. Perhaps talking to them, persuading them, or even just sitting inside our buildings waiting for them to come through the door. Why? So that they can swell our numbers, fill in the blank spaces on

the coffee rota, put their money in the plate and help keep the roof on?

If only Jesus had said “If you love me, form a committee. Arrange social events. Raise money. If you love me argue over the place of women, homosexuals, children, anyone that doesn’t look or sound or behave like me. If you love me have meetings, develop a strategy. Publish a leaflet to tell people about the strategy and invite them to the meetings. If you love me have a management structure, a synod, a council.” We’d be home and dry! As an old Priest friend of mine once said – If the kingdom of God was to be brought in by meetings and paperwork, it would have been here a long time ago!

But Jesus didn’t say any of those things. He said “If you love me, keep my commandments”. Love God, love one another. And love them the same way God has loved you – richly, abundantly, extravagantly. Why are we here as the Church? What is our purpose? To love people. That’s it. That’s what we do, what we should be doing as a Church. We should be a group of people who exist to follow the commandments of Jesus, who exist to love people.

And I wonder what loving people might mean? Well it’s going to mean different things for different people. There will be those who need their basic needs met, food, clothing, shelter. Those who need healing, a healing of physical wounds – through our prayers and anointing, working alongside those to whom God has given medical skill, but healing emotional and spiritual scars too – offering patience, acceptance, a listening ear, a cup of tea and a slice of cake. Those with a hunger to learn who need teaching, nurturing, guiding. Those who are full of such joy or such sorrow and they just need a safe space to let it all out. Those who are confused or anxious or sad

and need someone to sit alongside them and tell them that it's OK to be who they are.

You see, none of this is rocket science. It doesn't require us to be anything more than the people God has called us to be. But it is hard work, it is frightening at times.

I wonder if Jesus would recognise his Church if he came back tomorrow. Would he recognise us as the descendants of the little group of people to whom he gave that command? And I know it's not easy. It goes against all our natural inclinations. Much easier to hide in our buildings and have a meeting. But don't forget Jesus' promise – the one who is to come, the advocate, the comforter. The Holy Spirit who will stir us into action if only we give him half a chance.

As we approach Pentecost let us indeed pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray to be stirred up, re-vitalised and enabled to serve God and to follow his commandments. Let pray that our Churches, scattered and together, virtual and in person, on Facebook and in 1662 English may be centres of the love of God for his people.

If you love me, keep my commandments. By the grace of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit, may we show love for Jesus our Lord today and always.