

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – Sunday 9th May 2021

Acts 10.44-end; John 15.9-17

‘Abide in my love,’ says Jesus, and indeed, this is what it means to be a Christian. Christians are people who abide in the love of God, who live in the light of the love of God, who practice the love of God, who become strong in the love of God. And Jesus promises in this morning’s gospel reading that abiding in the love of God brings a profound joy that nothing, but nothing, can overcome.

And so, unusually, he commands his disciples to love one another. This is interesting because Jesus is not one generally to give commands to his disciples. Christianity is not a religion with a whole complex system of do’s and don’ts. Plenty of people have tried to make Christianity like that and still do, and that’s got something to do with the religious nature of many people, and the way many people like to use religion to have power over others.

The command to love one another cuts through all that. Christianity is not about telling people what to do, it’s about mutual service. In fact this command to love one another, to abide in the love of God; this command is really the **ONLY** command that Jesus ever explicitly gives to his disciples, as supposed to teachings. Jesus, you see, is much more a teacher of spiritual wisdom than he is a teacher of religious law, and this is what marks Christianity out as profoundly different from, say Islam or Judaism. Jesus taught in parables where people have to draw their own conclusions; he didn’t make laws, except this one.

And so Jesus commands us, to love one another. One of the ways to think about what a church is, or should be, is that it is a training centre in learning to keep this commandment of Jesus. But the Church is not called to be a training centre just for the like-minded, or just for those who are easy to get on with, or just for those who don’t have many faults and failings, or who never get angry. Abiding in the love of God means that the loving needs to be much bigger than that, and of course mutual forgiveness and mutual service has to be an integral part of it.

It is this quality of loving one another, that really makes the difference as to whether churches grow or not. Of course lots of other things matter too, the quality of worship, the quality of service to the wider community, the quality of welcome to the house of God, the quality of service in the life of the church, the quality of good administration, and so on. We need to try and do all these need well too. But without a faithful following of the commandment of Jesus for Christians to love one another, to abide in the love of God, it is hard for churches to grow much. For love covers a multitude of sins.

More than this, when someone has discovered the absolute treasure of abiding in the love of God, then they are much better placed to tell others about it, if they are willing to listen. In any church that is truly practising the new commandment, anyone who comes in, finds themselves enfolded in the love of Christ. This doesn’t mean that anything goes, that sin doesn’t matter. Wrong actions have consequences, and wrong behaviour needs to be corrected. But as with being loving to children, the loving itself doesn’t ever stop.

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Of course we Christians cannot do this on our own. We absolutely depend of the love of God, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, to keep the new commandment. This Holy Communion service reminds us deeply of this. To be able to keep this new commandment, we need to be continually fed and strengthened by God. We cannot do it in our own power. Human nature is just too weak.

A Christian community is one that has discovered the treasure of abiding in the love of God, but also it is one that knows its absolute need for God to have any hope at all of keeping the new commandment to love one another as Jesus has loved us. Indeed the ultimate purpose of all our spirituality, our praying, and singing, and reading and meditating, is learning to abide in the love of God. Amen.

CJ. 09.05.21