

**Sermon for Sunday, the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, 2014 – St John’s Church-Hall, Kidlington**  
**– The Command and Life of God: Love**

*Readings: Acts 17:22-31 Psalm 66:8-20 1 Peter 3:13-22 John 14:15-21*

Jesus said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The renowned German theologian, Karl Barth was lecturing to a group of students at Princeton. One student asked Barth, "Sir, don't you think that God has revealed himself in other religions and not only in Christianity?" Barth's answer stunned the crowd. With a modest thunder he answered, "No, God has not revealed himself in any religion, including Christianity. He has revealed himself in his Son."

We read in our lesson from Acts today that St Paul, about two thousand years ago, was addressing a rather different academic setting in Athens. His message though was practically as Barth's. Paul makes reference to the shrine to the Unknown God in Athens. He proclaims as known what they think of as unknown. He makes reference to the Greek poet Aratus of Soli when he says “for we too are his offspring.” That God, the One who created everything, the One who continues to be involved in everything created, the One in whom “we live and move and have our being” quoting the philosopher Epimenides, is not far from us. That this unknown God has made himself known, that he has revealed himself. In one man- God has revealed himself. That in Jesus we know what God is really like, and we cannot even begin to speak of this God who cannot be contained in our words without reference to this man anymore. This man who was born like us, lived, ate, slept, healed, washed feet, taught love, who executed, dead, resurrected and giving new life to all. That Jesus reveals to us what God is really like. Who the Father is, Jesus is. And who Jesus is, the Father is.

So what is revealed to us? What does it mean to follow this God who has revealed himself to us?

At the start of the Gospel reading this morning, Jesus says to his disciples “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Immediately, for all those who believe that religion is just about scaring people and telling them what to do, then this passage might seem to confirm their suspicions. To them this passage says “If you love me, you’ll do what I say or else” and all their waiting for is someone asking them for money. However, this would be to completely and totally miss the point of what Jesus is saying.

We should probably first set the scene. This is the last supper. The night before the crucifixion. There is growing tension in the air and the disciples are afraid. Jesus keeps speaking that he is going to be leaving them soon. This conversation begins after Jesus gets down and washes their feet. Right here we see what God is like. The God of the Universe, the Word made Flesh, gets down and washes their dusty, grimy, dirty feet. He models a different way, the way of serving others, *His* way that they are to imitate. He says “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Every time I hear those words it makes me increasingly uncomfortable with people who attend Maundy Thursday services and choose not to participate in the washing of feet. I think there is something to worry about in that, but that’s another sermon for another time.

After he washes their feet, Jesus says to them “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. *By this* everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This is what the start of the Gospel means when Jesus says “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” The way of Christ, the way of Christians is one that is centred on love. Not just thinking about things. Not about saying we’ll do something. It’s a life that is active not passive. A life that extends itself, it does just try and keep people at arms-length. It’s the difference between being nice and loving people.

In a sermon on this same passage, John Chrysostom, who was Bishop of Constantinople in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, once said:

*“We need everywhere works and actions, not a mere show of words. For to say and to promise is easy for any one, but to act is not equally easy. Why have I made these remarks? Because there are many at this time who say that they fear and love God, but in their works show the contrary; but God requires that love which is shown by works. Wherefore He said to the disciples, If you love Me, keep My commandments... I have given you a commandment that you love one another, that you do so to each other as I have done to you; this is love, to obey these My words, and to yield to Him who is the object of your love.”*

St Peter in his first letter that we also heard, also encourages us to live a certain way. He writes: “All of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for *this* that you were called.” The way that St Peter encourages us to live the way of Christ. To live a life of love.

Jesus shows us that God is Love, as St John writes. That God loves everybody. You, me, and everyone everywhere. More than we could possibly ever imagine. And so a Christian should, too. God loves the people who hate us and love us. And God loves the people that I struggle to love. God love people who don’t even think that God exists. And some people think that God only loves them, and God loves them too. And some people think they’re right and everyone else is wrong, and God loves them too. God loves everybody. As St James writes, God shows no favouritism. God loves everybody. Isn’t that what draws you to God? That’s what draws me. Isn’t that the hope that is born within us? Is that something that this the world, our neighbours, our friends, our families, need to hear, need to see. That love is born. In the darkest of nights, hope lives. That Love is born. Love is always born.

To quote Karl Barth again, he once said that ““On the basis of the eternal will of God we have to think of every human being, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with them on this assumption. If the other person knows that already, then we have to strengthen them in the knowledge. If they do not know it yet or no longer know it, our business is to transmit this knowledge to them.”

Surely that is something worth getting out of bed for. One of our tasks as Christians, a task that the Holy Spirit can give us the strength to do, is to show that God loves everybody and to live the life of God, to follow his commandments, is to love. Love that is patient, love that is kind. Love that keeps no account of wrongs. A love that never ends. And as a human race, when we try to, love is something that we do very well. It’s the most wonderful and the

hardest thing we strive to do. It's the best thing in world and something that Creation couldn't live without. For after all, God is Love and this God is with us always.

And we have here in this gospel a promise – not only does God show us what he is like, that his way is love, but that he will never abandon us. “I will not leave you orphans” he says. No matter what, his promises live in us forever. That the love that bade us welcome, as George Herbert writes, never goes out.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*by Fr Luke Hopkins*