

Homily for 9th May

Texts: Psalm 98, John 15: 9-17

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

One of the problems with the English language is that we only have the one word love which has to be used whether we declare; ‘Ooh I do love mint choc ice cream’ or ‘I’d love to go to the Bahamas’ or of course ‘I do love you will you marry me?’ What lies behind such usage may vary hugely in terms of what exactly we mean by love. So, what precisely is it that Jesus is asking us to do when he asks us to love one another in the same manner as he loves us? And here it is interesting to note that Greek has no less than eight different words for love and the one which is central to the gospel is ‘agape’ which is understood as selfless universal love. Also, it is worth noting that the Hebrew word most in use to express love is ‘ahava’ which is described as more than just a word it is an emotion that involves action and where Hebrew is the national language love is a way of life. And we should surely ask ourselves is that true of our lives?

Of course, we know that the greatest and most perfect proof of his love was Jesus’ willingness to give his very life for us and indeed having commanded us to love each other he does go on in the same gospel passage to say; ‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’ But except in time of war or in quite remarkable circumstances most people will never be called upon to give up their very life for another.. This said only very recently there was the story of the remarkable twenty year old Nigerian Olubunmi-Adewole, known to his friends as Jimi, who when crossing London Bridge saw a woman fall into the Thames and he and another bystander, despite the cold and darkness, leapt unhesitatingly into the water to try to save her and in so doing Jimi lost his own life. The last words he spoke to a friend who was with him were ‘I have to save her, I’m going to save her.’

So, in what other ways can we be expected to emulate the love of Jesus? And thinking about this it struck me that what Jesus did again and again was notice people and not only notice them but recognize their needs. One delightful example of this is when Zaccheus, desperate to catch a glimpse of this man who was grabbing everyone’s attention; knowing his stature was such he would never be able to see at the back of the crowd rushed ahead of Jesus and his disciples and climbed a sycamore tree. Now I don’t know about you, but I suspect if I was walking along minding my own business I could so easily not even notice someone was up in the branches of a tree an if I did it would surely only strike me as somewhat odd but not worth stopping for and starting a conversation with him or her let alone asking myself to dinner at their house. But Jesus not only observed Zaccheus, but far more importantly he was able to recognize that here was a

man who needed to be befriended, who in fact needed to be loved. Remember tax collectors were not exactly flavour of the month back then any more than they are now and add to this prejudicial dislike was the fact that at a guess his lack of stature had in itself made him the butt of jokes and unkind remarks. Jesus noticed, Jesus acted and in so doing he changed a life completely. Can we say that we have done the same?

For another example, think of how Jesus noticed lepers and instead of moving away as fast as he could to avoid the risk of infection he noticed, their plight, he acted and he changed their lives. And perhaps in this time of pandemic this is something for us to think about and whether just sometimes it's more important to embrace someone in need rather than stand aloof and socially distanced?

Then if we look at the parables Jesus told there is one in particular I think which illustrates perfectly this need to notice, to act and thus to show love. The story of the Good Samaritan who despite any possible risk to himself stopped to help the seriously injured man on the road. Unlike the priest and the Levite, he did not simply walk on but, regardless of his own safety, when he saw the need, he acted, and acted with considerable magnanimity and he not only saved that man's life, but I suspect changed it as well.

I know I could cite many more examples, but I hope that I have made the point that I think is central to today's gospel which is that in order to emulate the love of Christ we must always be prepared to notice all the people around us; notice their needs; notice their pain and act to help and alleviate such needs, such pain. It may be the tiniest act which in the great scheme of things seems so insignificant but that isn't what matters. And here I would like to give an example from my own experience. My daughter was very ill in hospital in London, and I had moved into her flat so that I could be with her all through the day. Travelling back to the flat one night in a crowded rush hour tube train and undoubtedly in my distress and exhaustion looking like the proverbial dog's dinner a young man suddenly got up from his seat and offered it to me. He had noticed, he had acted, and I will never forget that act of selfless love at a time when I needed all the love I could get.

In John's first letter he writes: 'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help. Little children let us love, not in word or in speech, but in truth and action.' Every instance when having noticed someone in need and acted on their behalf we are surely displaying our willingness to live our lives in a true and obedient response to that commandment that we should love one another as Jesus has loved us. The needs may range from bothering to check what is needed in the Food Bank this week to

noticing that someone is really struggling with ill health or the burdens of managing work and a family and needs a bit of comforting reassurance, or to responding to the appeal for funds to provide oxygen for the desperately overstretched hospitals in India. So let us pray that we make it part of our Christian journey to notice the person up a tree, notice those who have been ravaged by the circumstances of their life, notice those who have been scarred in some way by the pandemic and act in love towards them whoever they may be.'

'Love is more than just a word, it is an emotion that involves action, love is a way of life.'

'If you keep in mind my mercy, you will not be mean-spirited with yourself or with your neighbour. On the contrary, you will be generous in your compassion, nourishing your neighbour with all that you have, all that I have given you. Catherine of Siena