

**1. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.' (v.12). Famous words indeed! But how can we really absorb this into our lives?**

And the question I particularly asked myself this week was: why is this a reading during Easter season? How does reflecting on the cross and resurrection and message of Easter give us particular insight into this passage today? And the more I have reflected on that question, the more I have been reminded that a central message of Easter is forgiveness. And if we are to love well, then forgiveness is going to have to become a permanent habit – even more, a true 'way of life'. As Martin Luther King Junior said: ***'Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.'***

**2. A few weeks ago when preaching on the resurrection, I mentioned the fact that one of the amazing impacts of the resurrection was that Peter and the disciples ended up preaching a message of forgiveness and hope to the people of Jerusalem, some of whom were the very people who had killed their hero, leader, teacher! That is a pretty amazing story!**

But part of the reason for this must have been because Peter and the disciples knew that first and foremost, they were forgiven too! Let's think about Peter's story after the crucifixion. He has seen his master and mentor, his deepest friend, his wisest counsellor – he has seen him killed. But this Jesus whom he said he would follow - 'to the moon and stars and back!' – Peter had denied at the last. When the chips were down, and life got dangerous, Peter denied he ever knew Jesus to those who were out to get Jesus' followers. He sunk under pressure and denied he ever knew his most loving friend.

If the story ended there – with Jesus' death – then Peter would be left lingering with shame, regret, inner turmoil: 'the last thing I did for this dear friend was deny I knew him!'. It would probably eat away at him. He would become a bruised shadow of his former, bold self. As Stephen King wrote, ***'Men and women who can't get over their past... that's what ghosts are.'***

So what does Peter feel like when the risen Christ stands in front of him? Joy? Hope? Maybe! But surely, a deep cavernous fear too: 'What will Jesus think of me? He knows my story and knows how I gave in at the last!' If you have ever betrayed a friend in some way, you know that gut wrenching feeling when you are confronted by that friend, 'How could you do this to me?' But we read (elsewhere in John's gospel): the resurrected Christ restores Peter. So Peter knows deeply: 'I am forgiven.' Profoundly! And that is true for all of us too! The risen Christ stands in front of each one of us – with all our memories and broken pasts – and still loves us!

**3. So, why that very extended introduction and reflection on what is not even in our Bible passages today?! Because Jesus says in today's passage, 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.' 'As I have loved you' is really important!**

We all know the fragility and imperfection in our own ability to love. We find it difficult to love those not like us. We find it difficult to love all the time. We so easily slip into thinking that love is only a feeling (it is that, yes but....!) rather than living love as an action in the entirety of our lives. At face value, hearing this commandment can make us feel warm and fuzzy. Wouldn't it be great if we could all just love each other easily, all the time?

But we know, if we think too hard, this is the most challenging of all commandments. Because Jesus says 'as I have loved you.' And he then goes on, ***'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'*** Can you do this? Can you lay down your life for your friends? Can you forgive those who have hurt you deeply?

I think we can only begin to live this commandment if we, like Peter, stand in front of the risen Christ with all our memories, all our lives and know Jesus restores us first. So the first thing in hearing this commandment is to remember and know: you are a deeply loved, forgiven child of God (yes, each one of us)! I am sure (we are all members of the human race!) that each of us have parts of our past we want to avoid, we want to bury, we are ashamed of. Our minds might have even managed to play tricks for us so that we bury these memories. But they will forever lurk, they are life-sapping, and ultimately they limit our capacity to love others well.

‘Love one another, as I have loved you.’ Know you are forgiven. Know you are loved. Then you have some hope of starting to live this commandment more deeply.

**4. Jesus continues, ‘You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.’ (v.14-15)** This is quite a change! We are no longer servants but friends of Christ – of God, by extension. And the contrast is even more stark in the Greek: the word in Greek we translate as ‘servant’ (δουλος) actually means ‘slave’.

The reason our Bible translate the word as servant is because our word slave has such horrific resonances and only refers to forced, coercive and often inhumane control of one human by another. But the word δουλος could mean voluntary or involuntary slavery, on the part of the slave – in the culture of the time, people might choose to be slaves because it represented the best way of life they might get (if they worked for a good master). But the point is, whether it was voluntary or involuntary, it was always *unequal*. The master had control and the slave had given away any rights to self-choice.

We might assume that if God exists – and we know God is so beyond our imaginings and so much more powerful than us – then it is going to be a pretty lopsided relationship! But Jesus is saying, no! Because you understand that love is at the heart of God, whilst this might cause a logical conundrum for you, you need to start to live and understand, you are my friends – and by extension, God’s friends!

It was that shake up that helped make Peter, Jewish Peter, realise (in our Acts reading today) that all of us can access and have friendship with God. For Peter, Jesus was a Jew who never told Peter to give up his being a Jew. So for Peter, that surely meant others who wanted to follow Christ – surely they had to follow Jewish customs too?! Or did it?! Because God’ Spirit comes on the gentile Cornelius – and so Peter realises that this friendship that Jesus offered must be available for all.

#### **5. How is God speaking to you today through these passages?**

Maybe you need to hear a message of forgiveness for yourself, which will then free you up to live this command to love more deeply? Maybe knowing this forgiveness can help you forgive others who have hurt you in the past? Because only with forgiveness can love flourish! Or maybe you need to hear Jesus calling you friend, not servant?

My sense is that it is this deep understanding of personal forgiveness and acceptance, and growing to know himself as a friend of Christ, that enabled the Nigerian Pastor James Wuye to meet with the Imam Muhammad Ashafa in the 1990s and eventually establish a joint peacebuilding initiative in northern Nigeria. They had both trained militia leaders on their own sides in the dreadful Christian-Moslem conflict of Nigeria. How could men who had stoked inter-religious violence come to be promoters of peace? I sense Pastor James must have started by knowing he was forgiven, knowing he was called to forgive, and knowing he was a friend of Christ. May we know the same!