

EASTER 6 Yr. B St Faith's Havant

If you were asked to come up with a single word that sums up the message of the gospels, a word you might choose is 'love'. That would not be a bad choice, especially if you had in mind the gospel of St John, which contains more references to love than all the other gospels put together. In the passage we've just heard, from John chapter 15, Jesus tells his disciples: *'This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.'*

But love is a word with a wide range of meanings – from mild affection (*'I so love jellied eels!'*) to passionate desire. In Hebrew, as in English, there is just one word – *ahabh* - to cover the many different kinds of love. On the other hand, in Greek, which is the language of the New Testament, there are four different words that all translate into English as 'love'. What kind of love is it that Jesus commands? One thing is clear: love is not simply, nor even primarily, a matter of feelings. Loving feelings are by definition lovely, but they are unstable and unreliable. Today I may feel loving towards entire human race; tomorrow I may feel more like Victor Meldrew! Without deeds, loving feelings won't get you very far. The love of which Jesus speaks is, in Greek, *agape* – self-giving, self-outpouring love, that is prepared, if need be, to let go of life itself. It is this kind of love which St John sees fully demonstrated on the Cross; it is this kind of love which for John is the very nature of God himself. In his first Letter, he writes: *God is love*; and this goes further and deeper than simply *'God is loving'* which Judaism had been saying for centuries.

But if love is not a matter of mere feelings, neither is it a matter of sheer will-power. Love cannot be willed; it must come from the heart if it is to be genuine; and, even with the best of intentions, it cannot be feigned. There are some folk who fondly imagine that they can, by sheer will-power and effort, whip themselves up into a frenzy of loving acts; I fear they may be those of whom it is said: *'He lives for others; and you can tell who the others are by the hunted look on their faces!'*

But the good news is that we are made **by** love and made **for** love; we do not have to will it into being. In fact, as Jesus makes very clear in today's gospel, our first task is not **to** love but to let ourselves **be** loved. *'Abide in my love'* he says. I was once told that that the Greek word we translate *'abide'* is the word

that is also used in classical literature for the relationship between a nursing mother and her baby. So what Jesus is challenging us to do is to let go, like a babe at breast, and open ourselves to what we need most: simply resting in the love that made us and delights in us. How often, I wonder, do we dare to practise that kind of letting-go? How often are we able to picture God as one who regards us with the same sheer delight that a mother has for her baby? A challenge I sometimes put to people who visit me for spiritual companionship is this: imagine that God is looking at you; what look or expression is on God's face? Very often the answer contains elements of disappointment; only rarely does it include pleasure or delight. And this is sad – because if our capacity for recognising our belovedness is limited, so too will be our capacity for showing love to others.

But if, on other hand, we can begin to recognise just how much we are loved, how infinitely precious we are to our Maker, then his christlike love will naturally arise in and through us. We need to free ourselves from self-conscious anxiety about how we are doing – which includes, of course, anxiety about whether we are as loving as we should be. That's not easy in a world that is as focused on achievement and success as ours. But when it comes to love, what counts is not success, but faithfulness.

It's very helpful to remember that when Jesus commands us to love one another, he adds the words: *'As I have loved you.'* It is those words that make it a new commandment; not simply to love one another – that command had been part of Jewish law for many centuries - but to love **as I have loved you**. At the start of his account of the Last Supper, St John gives us a literally down-to-earth example of what sort of love this might be. Without making a great show of it, naturally and unselfconsciously Jesus washes his friends' feet; and after doing so, he makes it clear that he has not just shown them what to do – he has also loved them into the possibility of doing it. *'If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.'*

To repeat something I said earlier: we are made by love, and we are made for love. So when we even just begin to love in a christlike way, we shall gradually find that we can do without the shells that we thought were so necessary for our protection, and live the fully human, vulnerabl, yet joyful lives for which we were created. Christlike love **is** possible for all – because the love that

makes it possible is available **to** all. We **can** do it, and, as we do it, two things happen: we learn what it means to be fully alive, and we experience the glory of the living God. It was a second- century bishop, Irenaeus of Lyons, who said: *'The glory of God is a human being fully alive.'*

By a happy – and perhaps providential – coincidence, just as I was finishing this sermon yesterday morning, my wife drew my attention to a review in Friday's 'Church Times' of a novel called *'Abide with me'* by the prize-winning American novelist Elizabeth Strout. I haven't yet read the novel, but, after reading the review, I firmly intend to. What I can tell you from the review is that it is the story of a young clergyman who has lost wife, and lost himself, and is in danger of losing his congregation. Thankfully there is healing, but not before the young minister has been on a long and traumatic journey of self-discovery. What I gather, and hope to discover, is that by the end of story he has learnt to abide in God and God's love. Let me end by reading you closing words of the review:

*'Ultimately this is a book that asks questions about what it means to live a good life. It demonstrates just how critical it is that love should not be **defined** by "putting the other man first". It also includes learning to love ourselves and allowing ourselves to be loved. And that, maybe, is where God abides.'*

Amen