

SERMON: Sunday – 15 May 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

They will know we are Christians by our love

Acts 11:1-18

John 13:31-35

Gracious Lord of all,
Save us from the folly of the circumcised
Who looked upon the uncircumcised as less
Less than them, less than you.
Thank you for your word of truth, spoken to Peter,
Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.
Cleansing God of all
May we see the marks of Christ over all and in all.

The circumcised believers needed to hear Peter's experience of the Holy Spirit falling on those outside the tribe.

If the Spirit could fall on the uncircumcised then circumcision was no longer the only entry requirement. But was it ever?

Once they'd heard Peter's testimony, circumcised believers were satisfied and no doubt rejoiced in God's favour over all.

To paraphrase what Peter said, who are we to stand in God's way?

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John V Taylor said in his book *The Easter God*, that "God is more concerned that his children should be fully alive than that they should be religious".

God is the great gift giver who gifts his Spirit wherever life and grace and truth are needed. And the first fruit of that Spirit is Love. No wonder the Scriptures declare that God is Love.

Among Jesus last words, which we heard read today, were instructions for his followers to love one another.

It wasn't to hold firmly to the doctrine they'd believed or pray always or read the scriptures every day or visit the sick or give to the poor, all of which are good things to do.

But more than these, to love one another is the new commandment, the thing that would be most important in the days ahead; the mark of the true follower.

That you love one another as I have loved you. That's how to show one's true colours. That was and is the ultimate sign of following Christ. By this, the world will know that you are my disciples. The Christian's love for one another is how the world will know who they are and whose they are. Their love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Jesus.

Imagine what would happen to us, to the Church, to the world, if we took this commandment of Jesus's seriously.

G.K Chesterton once wrote that "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

It's not easy to love the Jesus way but Jesus hasn't left his followers alone and without help.

They/we are not direction-less . He gives us a road map, a clear and beautiful way forward: "As I have loved you."

Follow my example, he says. Do what I do. Love as I love. Live as you have seen me live. Weep with those who weep. Laugh with those who laugh. Touch the untouchables. Feed the hungry. Welcome the child. Release the captive. Forgive the sinner. Confront the oppressor. Comfort the oppressed. Wash each other's feet. Hold each other close. Tell each other the truth. Guide each other home.

In other words, Jesus's commandment is not that his followers should wear themselves out, trying to muster up the strength to love from their own easily depleted resources. Rather, it's that they're invited to abide in the holy place where all love originates.

Jesus followers can make their home in Jesus's love — the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence. Their love is not their own; it is God's, and God's source is without limit, without end. There are no parched places God will not drench if we ask.

Indeed, it maybe can't be stressed enough, the simple truth that it is God's love of us that is the root and the source of any love thereafter.

I read something this week about how Christianity has put major emphasis on us loving God. Yet down through the ages people who have contemplated love have consistently described an overwhelming experience of how it is God that loves us.

God is the initiator, God is the doer, God is the one who seduces us. It's all about God's initiative. Then we certainly want to love back the way we have

been loved. But it's always about returning love back. Loving in return. Loving in response to the love that first loved us.

As John puts it in 1 John 4, we love because God first loved us.

Or Paul, who writes to the Ephesians, Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.
Ephesians 1:4,9

We can only love one another in response to the great love that is God.

Corrie Ten Boom writes about her struggle to forgive her captor during her war time imprisonment and she reminds us in this quote that when Jesus commands his followers to love one another God gives them the love that is needed to fulfil that command:

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When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives along with the command, the love itself

Óscar Romero dreamed of this new kingdom where love would be at its root and he said of loving one another,

“If there were love of neighbour, there would be no terrorism, no repression, no selfishness, none of such cruel inequalities in society, no abductions, no crimes. Love sums up the law. Not only that, it gives a Christian meaning to all human relations. . . . Love gives plentitude to all human duties, and without love justice is only the sword. With love, justice becomes a brother's embrace. Without love, laws are arduous, repressive, cruel. . . . But when there is love— security forces would be superfluous, there would be no jail or tortures, no will to beat anyone.

(The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero, compiled and translated by James R. Brockman (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988))

As we grapple with this ancient commandment I wonder what it will mean for us, as individuals, as a church together, to love one another.

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It might mean widening our circle of compassion to paraphrase Albert Einstein who reportedly said, “our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty”.

It might mean being careful about our choice of words as well as about our actions. We might want to follow Nicky Gumbel's advice here,

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"The words of the tongue should have three gatekeepers: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?"

Whatever loving one another means to us, let's pray that as we sing this song - Brother, sister let me serve you - we'll get even more insight and be inspired to love as Jesus loved.