

Sermon for evensong trinity 9 2020

³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13.34-35

There is an old saying that simply states that you will catch more flies with honey than you will with vinegar. We could play with that a bit and suggest that love begets love and hate begets hate. Or, Peace brings harmony while war brings chaos. It is a conversation of opposites while knowing that our heart will search for one and it will be wary of the other.

It is a very strange person who would want only vinegar, hate, and war, in their lives. It is a very strange person indeed who would use a position of power and presumed respect to bring violence and death to others.

It is more in keeping with our holy lives that we should seek the sweetness of honey, the joy of love and the harmony of peace. It seems to me that while we seek these positive and wholesome things we can too often slip into a mindset where we will feel threatened and insecure. When this happens, we can find that anger and fear will indeed generate vinegar, hate, and war. There is nothing quite like taking revenge on someone who we believe has upset us.

When another person gossips about us, tells lies about us, or says disparaging things about us, it is very easy to think vinegar, hate, and yes, even war. What do we get for our perfect revenge? Usually chaos and a great disturbance of our equilibrium. In short, our revenge causes us pain and is no help at all. I read the other day that anger is simply the action of punishing ourselves for someone else's mistake.

The call by our Lord to love others as he has loved us can be very challenging indeed. I am quietly amused by the phrase, “O I love them, I just don't like them.” We use it when there is a particular person who we find to be crude, offensive, disparaging, uncouth, and is someone we would never wish to be seen with. “O I love them. I just do not like them.” If this sounds like a cop-out then you are right. It is. I have used the phrase myself in relation to some obnoxious person. But that is not what Jesus means, is it.

“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Now that makes it a bit more difficult. There are people in my life who I am very happy to leave to their own ends. If they are happy where they are, I am happy for them to be there. It seems that on closer examination, according to our Lord's instruction, this can be a bit of a cop-out as well.

On the other hand, I have seen our Lord take to a bunch of merchants with a whip. He has firmly corrected the errant and selfish ways of the Scribes and Pharisees. This must mean that our love for others is not some soppy thing that will see us exploited and abused. We are not to withdraw from difficult situations and allow the biggest and baddest bully to win. We are not to become punching bags for others.

The example of our Lord is that of love offered, with the proviso that we are to correct the behaviour of others when they exploit the innocent. The scribes and pharisees were accused of making laws that were impossible to obey; laws which they themselves could not obey; but were happy to punish others for putting aside.

An example of this was the event when Jesus healed a man on the sabbath. That was work. Work cannot be performed on the sabbath. Jesus responded by suggesting that if their ass fell down a well

on the sabbath they would save the animal. Is the animal more valuable than this person? The call to love must be a call to accept that there will be times when we will need to take a stand for that which is right and true.

The real distinction in offering the love of our Lord is to make a distinction between the person and the action. We can effectively debate an issue with differences of opinion and variable understandings just so long as we are careful not to introduce personal abuse. A silly idea does not necessarily make a person any less valuable or to be any less respected. When we want a debate to go off the rails very quickly, we simply call the other person a complete idiot who has less brain capacity than a rock. That will work.

When we debate in love, we are free to examine the logic and the credence of the idea or the subject. We debate with respect and we maintain truth. As soon as debate falls into name calling and inflammatory accusations, we both lose. We lose respect. We lose focus. We lose authority. And we have compromised our knowledge.

Jesus has called us to love each other as he has loved us. This means that Jesus loves us even though we may have some unlovable characteristics. He calls us to improve ourselves through prayer and self-discipline. He encourages us to raise each other up, and not to judge or condemn. He asks us to love all people, regardless of what we perceive to be their faults. He calls us to love our enemies. We can identify ourselves with the saying that love conquers all. For this is true.

Our Lord offered himself, his life, in love; and he conquered the devil and he conquered death. Love has overcome our greatest enemies. These enemies are the temptations and the snares of the devil and eternal death. By his act of love, we can live life to the full knowing that this earthly life is but a short period, a mere blip, when viewed within eternity. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory. For it is a victory that could only be achieved through God's love for us.