

Jesus said: 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments'.

Just occasionally a theological discussion breaks out in our house. I have to admit that it's an unusual occurrence. Any minister does quite a lot of church, and in my time I have worked in places where the religion is high octane and relentless. Here in Beverley there are substantial pastoral demands and complex questions every day. All of that adds up to the fact that almost the last thing I want to do is carry it all on at home.

But a discussion does happen once in a while, and a memorable one some years ago was about the theme of our Gospel reading today. One of my colleagues in York was very uncomfortable with a Christianity based on rules and commands. He was very much into love, and inclusion, and welcome. A loving church, he felt, can't define people by whether they keep the rules or not. All have a place. Except...in one sermon he came perilously close to saying that if you didn't agree that all were welcome then you weren't welcome either. A welcoming church must expel those who aren't welcoming. For my colleague love was the criterion by which everything is measured, and to condemn someone because of a doctrine is quite probably not a loving act. For others, though, if you don't obey the law, if you don't act in an orthodox way, then you have denied the Gospel. There is a balance between doctrine and love...and finding it takes all of our Christian life, I guess.

This continues to be quite an issue for the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. For example: my predecessor as curate in Hartlepool is the first Church of England Priest to have entered a same sex marriage. How we think and act towards homosexuality has become a theological litmus test in these days. The House of Bishops has simultaneously annoyed traditionalists by saying that those in a same sex relationship or marriage must not be denied the sacraments of the church, and inclusivists by implying that clergy in same sex marriages might be subject to discipline – and my predecessor has indeed been contacted by the lawyers. Inclusion, or doctrine? No one envies the Archbishop of Canterbury his task.

There have been other such defining issues, some of which remain powerful for some. Marriage in church after divorce – not so long ago you had to leave the Mothers' Union if you were divorced. The ordination of women. In previous centuries it might have been the theory of evolution, or whether the earth goes round the sun. At each point the church had to decide whether contradictory opinions could be held. Our kitchen table discussion asked whether there has to be a point where truth points out error, where love is just not enough. Can it be a loving act to point out something which is wrong, to exclude people in order to change someone's behaviour, to condemn in order to expose an wrong belief?

There are various parts to this discussion. It does seem obvious to me that the church has to guard its truth especially about the doctrine of God. Battles have been fought and lives lost over what Christians believe about Jesus Christ, for example. The early church came to the doctrine of Jesus as fully human and fully divine after arguments lasting centuries and the church today takes the divinity and humanity of Christ as its touchstone. Groupings which are Christian in flavour but believe other things about Christ are not part of the Christian Church precisely because of this. Jehovah's witnesses believe Jesus was 'a God', not God,

for example. A belief in the Holy Trinity is also central, and any division on this would indeed be 'Communion breaking'.

But what about the next level of doctrines – about what happens in Holy Communion, about marriage, about human sexual expression, about the way the ministry of the church is organised and about whether women can have a part in each order? This is where a command to love our neighbour and a command to love God can come into real conflict, and it depends whether you take these things as 'first order' issues, or something we can agree to have differing opinions about. It does seem to me that Christians who define themselves by what they are not walk the way of schism, condemnation and death. If keeping the words of Christ means treating people on a way which Christ would not have done, then we stand condemned ourselves. If a desire to find the truth only expresses itself in showing how others are untrue, and in pursuing them until they change, or else, then we fall into error ourselves. It is not loving to be nasty.

Where might help be found? When Jesus talked about love, law, commandments, truth, teaching and keeping his word he used language which at once rose above the pettiness and shabbiness of human discourse. His love, agape, was all about self denial and self giving, not self growth and self pleasure. His words are *logos*, the very word which brought all things into being in the beginning. His commandments are those which find their centre in his life of service and self sacrifice: they are true because they are good, they are good because they are true. And we are called to 'observe' his commandments – to have them to mind and apply them in each situation, not to follow them so slavishly that we have to ask how many times to forgive our brother.

And in all this we have the help and power of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, Paraclete, Comforter, the one who is alongside to help us. It is essential as we consider how to act towards others so that we demonstrate our love of God, that we pray for guidance, teaching, interpretation and power from God. If we do not we will act according to our prejudices and at the limit of our small minds. In these days, as we prepare to mark the Ascension and Pentecost, we cry out as did the early disciples for the gift of the Holy Spirit. I pray more and more that the Spirit, the interpreter, will enable the word to love in us. Because my opinions are only worth so much.

'If you love me', said Jesus, 'keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever'. Jesus promises that we will not be orphaned, but that, in the Spirit, he will be with us. As we work out, with fear and trembling, how our love for God is shown through our obeying God's commands, Jesus offers us the reality of a relationship, reconciliation, of differences working together for a greater good, of working and being and worshipping together. To keep Jesus's word is to love, to challenge, to be a new community, to struggle together to reveal heaven. May we do that, hold to the truth, offer love and know his presence with us. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.