

# I give you new Commandment ...

*... that you love one another*

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*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2019 by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster.*

*Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35*

There was a short news story in the Times about welfare pets in Universities. In it, there was a line that said Wadham College, Oxford had a welfare cat named Jonah.

Following this, I had a phone call from the journalist for the Telegraph who wanted to write a follow up article about Jonah. I assumed, naively that the journalist had done her homework and was fully aware that Jonah was, in fact, a cockerpoo - who pretended to be a cat in order to get round ancient college regulations about livestock - cats kill mice and are thus allowed!

Anyway, the journalist arrived, I went to meet her with Jonah on his lead and, looking utterly bewildered, she declared - but where's the cat??? We moved on rapidly and she wrote a lovely article with some fabulous photos - but reminded me of how often we get distracted by headlines and news articles that may not be the exact or entire truth.

I read a similarly misleading story this week - it was about an MP who had 2 ovens. The original headline was shock that he had 4 ovens....but it was later discovered that he only had 2 - the confusion being that they were both double ovens. The implication was that this was greedy and an abuse of his expenses.

What the story failed to tell the reader was that the Community Secretary has a wife who is Jewish - and within Jewish food laws, having 2 ovens and 2 sinks makes keeping kosher much easier and is a common practice within the faith.

When you are inside a group or organisation, the rules, regulations, quirky ideas or rituals - about livestock or food-or anything, seem entirely normal - they are what you know, what you do, what makes sense. Talk to any football fan about the unique chants

and songs that belong to their team. Morris dancers on the Westwood early on May morning - is strange - but most rural British people don't bat an eyelid. Virggers, wands, processions and robes....are utterly alien to those outside the church and non-conformist denominations - I'm sure many here don't understand what these all mean and why we do them....but it's not shocking and none of you look surprised - if Jonathan turned up to lead a service in his dressing gown and wellington boots one week - there might be a few raised eyebrows. (I used Jonathan for an example there because if *I* did, I can't imagine many people being surprised!!)

I hope that all these examples have got you thinking - and will help you as we ponder our reading from Acts this morning. Peter had done the unthinkable - and gone to eat with a group that were different from his own - it wasn't just that they did things differently (they weren't circumcised) but this fact it meant they weren't Jewish....they were utterly alien, to be avoided at all costs. This was far more serious than just thinking they were odd, this was sitting with the rival team at a football match, voting for the opposition, betraying their entire national and religious identity.

Peter had had a vision from God. He saw a sheet filled with animals that were forbidden from being eaten in Jewish law. Three times he was told to kill and eat the animals on the sheet - *what God has made clean you must not call profane*. Straight after this vision, 3 men arrived and the Spirit told Peter to go with them to Caeserea where a group of people had also been instructed by God to fetch Peter and ask him to explain his faith - so they could share it.

The part that always strikes me about this passage is that all this happened as Peter prayed. He was, we assume, praying for people to come to share his faith - and God answered his prayer the most utterly surprising way - come and tell the least likely people, the people who do things differently from you, the people from a very different group - and see how my love is more than enough for them.

In my experience, this story is still very true today - when we pray for people to share our faith, to experience the good news that we have come to know - God often sends the least likely people into our lives - or us to the least likely places! When I began my

curacy, I was in the heart of Birmingham - one of the most multi cultural places in Britain with people from every background and every faith group. I was used to working with people from other faiths as I used to teach in inner city London - but it was still a huge shock when 3 weeks into my brand new role, 3 young muslim men were murdered by 2 black young men who drove cars into them - apparently a response to a gang incident. As it was the summer and my training incumbent was on holiday, I met the Bishop in the mosque at 8am the following morning and I spoke on national news about the need for peace and loving our neighbour in Birmingham....important relationships and conversations began at that moment - having been sent to the least likely of people. Choosing to love instead of fear opened up new worlds, new friendships and a whole new way of understanding God.

When I began work at Wadham I had no idea what it would be like - I assumed (wrongly) that the students would be rich, posh and privileged....instead it turned out I had landed in the most left wing, radical, inclusive, pro state school, challenging of the status quo college in the whole of Oxbridge. I thought I would be encouraging them to consider issues of justice - instead, they challenged me to the very core.

Many of the students identified as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender or simply 'queer' as they termed themselves. I began the steepest learning curve imaginable, learning a new language, a whole new ideology and a whole new world where people are still having to fight for their right to exist. In the midst of my journey I asked God why I was there and what I should do....the answer was a clear in my head as Peter's vision....Just let them know they're loved and welcome.....I spent the rest of my time there doing just that - and, like Peter, discovering that God's love and grace and mercy is way bigger than my sheltered and largely conservative upbringing. I met some of the most fabulous people I've ever known - because I chose love instead of fear.

You may be aware that the Archbishops of Canterbury and York began a prayer initiative a couple of years ago called Thy Kingdom Come. It is a global call to pray, across nations and denominations - to pray daily for the 9 days from Ascension Day until Pentecost for people to come to know the good news of Jesus' love. We will be

joining with the other churches in Beverley to pray morning and evening - with some creative ideas and help for those of us who aren't sure how to pray.

But here's the thing...be careful what you pray for - or, be careful who you pray for...as we heard in our gospel reading, before Jesus returns to his Father (which is what we celebrate on Ascension Day, coming up shortly) he leaves his disciples with a profoundly radical message: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* <sup>35</sup> *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

I wonder, if we take this call to prayer seriously, who God might be wanting us to demonstrate his love to both through our own networks or as a church. I wonder who we might find drawn into the Minster who we have to overcome some fears or assumptions before we can reach out and begin to show them love. I wonder, if we are honest, how do we respond when we meet someone new or different? Are we the first to introduce ourselves and invite them for coffee...or do we struggle with our own shyness and fear that we have nothing to offer.

I wonder what group of people would be on the large sheet if you had a vision from God like Peter? Who would make you feel uncomfortable if they sat next to you, joined your small group or asked if you could meet them for a chat?

This week is mental health awareness week and an important opportunity for us to be honest about our fears and open about the fact we all see the world differently. One in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives - and it would be wonderful if here at the Minster we could create spaces where people felt safe to talk about their struggles as well as their joys.

Anxiety and depression can make it hard for people to join in large conversations and even getting out of bed can be a struggle on the difficult days. Different ways of processing and communicating information can mean some people learn differently and need alternative ways to feel involved and valued. Many people value professional support and I am in awe of the amazing work of doctors, psychiatrists, counsellors and mental health teams, having seen them in action.

There is much still that we can offer as a community of faith and as supportive friends. If you feel you'd like to learn more about mental health and how to better support others, MIND produce some excellent materials, as do Mind and Soul an organization set up to equip churches in this area.

Next week during our Sunday at 7 service we will be hearing from some people who live with different mental health conditions, sharing how they have encountered God in the midst of their difficulties and how a loving community can be a positive part of their healing journey. Removing any stigma and shame in sharing parts of our story is a start to journeying together and learning to embrace difference.

As mentioned earlier, we are about to launch a series of new small groups - alongside the myriad of groups that already exist - from the choir, to the staff team, the walkers and bell ringers to the coffee drinkers. These offer a variety of spaces to learn and grow together - to start conversations and seek to support each other and pray for each other - *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*"

## Reading Texts

Acts 11:1-18

**11** Now the apostles and the believers<sup>[a]</sup> who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. **2** So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers<sup>[b]</sup> criticized him, **3** saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” **4** Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, **5** “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. **6** As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. **7** I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ **8** But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ **9** But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ **10** This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. **11** At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. **12** The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.<sup>[c]</sup> These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. **13** He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; **14** he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ **15** And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. **16** And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ **17** If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” **18** When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

John 13:31-35

<sup>31</sup> When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup> If God has been glorified in him,<sup>[a]</sup> God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup> Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ <sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”