

Just as I have loved you ...

... so you must love one another

A sermon given on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 15th May 2022, by the Curate the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in Beverley Minster

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

There's something about an imminent departure that focuses the mind moment. When the moments left are few, they become precious, crucial, essential - that one last opportunity to say a few words. I'm sure like me, you've seen plenty of movies where there's a dramatic climate when one character is about to depart, to say goodbye, and suddenly the moment is filled with significance and importance. Suddenly all that needs to be said has to be condensed into one moment, condensed into just a few words. It's not uncommon in the movies for those words to be 'I love you' or perhaps the plea to tell someone else that they love them - tell Charlotte I love her.

In today's gospel reading, in this significant moment, we have both. Jesus does remind us that he loves us: "*I have loved you*" he says, but he also gives us a command: "*Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.*" We, as the ones being left behind for a moment, are being given that command. Will you do just one thing for me? Will you show the world that I love them? And how are we to do that?

Love is one of those strange words, isn't it? Just four little letters, yet so hard to define. I like the story of when some children were once asked to define love and describe it, and here are some of their answers: Rebecca, age eight, said, "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands have got arthritis, too. That's love." Or Chrissy, age six who said, "Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs." Now those are great answers, and they may not give us a dictionary definition of love, but they do show us what love looks like, how love changes us, and how we can see love in action in others. Perhaps when the average person in the street talks of love, they may focus on what love feels like.

But Jesus is more concerned with loving action. Love is defined by all that he has been and done for the disciples. And these moments in our gospel reading are spoken just before , ultimate demonstration of love in action on the cross. This is what he is calling us to, and commanding us to do: to love as he loves.

Now, you may have heard it said before, but if we were each individually and perhaps collectively as a community put on trial for being Christians, would there be enough evidence to convict us? There are many things that you might think could be used as evidence: coming to this place each Sunday; singing the right hymns or songs; praying and reading the Bible. But Jesus tells us that the way that people will truly know that we are his people is that they can see it in the way that we love others. A loving community is the visible authentication of the gospel.

Now 'apologetics' is that discipline of defending the faith and religious doctrines through argument and debate. And there are many good questions in apologetics that we as Christians should engage with, such as, why is there evil in the world? Or what's the relationship between science and religion? However, I was struck by a theologian, Francis Schaefer, when he once powerfully said, "Love is the final apologetic. More than any persuasive argument or logic, the way that people can see and understand the Christian faith is through our demonstration of love." And as our reading today from Acts teaches us, the demonstration of this love transcends boundaries. Jesus's message of love wasn't just for the Jews, it was also for the Gentiles. He said, "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.*" So we are not the custodians of the precious gifts to be guarded and only meted out to others as we see fit. Jesus doesn't tell us to love only others in the Church community or to love others that look the same as us or share the same interests or outlook. As it says in Acts, '*Who are we to place limits on God's love?*' The Church is to be marked by an inclusiveness that mirrors Jesus's love for all. In 2 Corinthians 5:15, It doesn't say, "Christ died for some of us." It says, "Christ died for all of us." By his action, by his stripes, by his love and his command for us to love in the same way, we should be identified as a community which welcomes all people irrespective of background, age, gender, sexuality, colour, social influence, intelligence, religious custom and practice, religious background or the lack of it. The Diocese of York vision statement includes as one of its four goals the goal of growing a Church of missionary disciples where each person in the Church plays their part in reaching others. Now, I am well aware that this terrifies some with the thoughts that we are all

supposed to be each, fearsome evangelists preaching to our friends or worse still on street corners. But I don't believe that that is the intention. I was reminded when I attended a recent Christian event talking about the restoration and rebuilding of the Church, that we as the Church are simply called to love people and that God, through his Holy Spirit, will take care of the rest. Love first - it can be that simple. Loving others as the foundation of who we are.

So let that be our prayer this week that we are guided and prompted into loving others through action as well as words, and with a love that breaks new ground and transcends the limits that we might otherwise place on it. Carry with you the words of Jesus from these climactic moments of his departure - *"I love you."*

Show the world that I love them too.

Reading Texts

John 13:31-35

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ 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." 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.'