

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH EASTER 5 YEAR C 19 MAY 2019

‘All you need is love,’ went The Beatles’ song of 1967. Many pop songs are about love: romantic love. It’s easily said – or sung – and it’s a good sentiment. But the reality can be much more difficult. Staying for a moment with love between a couple, anyone who’s had that sort of close relationship knows that love has to be worked at and grown into over years: throughout life, in fact. It is a blessing when that happens. We know only too well, however, that relationships can encounter problems, and sometimes separation is inevitable. Even if an appearance of being a couple is maintained, the love may have turned into indifference.

Jesus said to his disciples, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” He wasn’t talking about romantic love, but love in the Christian community. The command is simple to express and completely good. It is God’s will, and God always wants the best for people. But we’re not very good at doing what is best for us. It is difficult to practise Christian love. We have to work at it and grow in our capacity to show love.

Loving all people is a good ideal, but the world at large is far from achieving it. It always has been. There is a telling verse in the 2nd book of Samuel in the Old Testament which speaks of spring being the time of year when kings go out to battle. At the present time Russians are bombing in Syria and America is sending aircraft carriers to the Gulf. But Jesus is not speaking about universal love in today’s gospel. In a much more limited sense he is telling his followers to love each other.

As you know, the record of the church over the centuries is mixed, to put it mildly. Wars have been fought, Christians tortured and executed by each other, because of differences of belief. In our own day the institutional church and influential individuals within the church have failed to care for children and vulnerable adults. There are ample grounds to condemn the church for not practising what it preaches. Pointing out that the church is not the only guilty institution does not absolve it of failure. Against this negative assessment, the church has been instrumental in doing a great deal of good. It has pioneered education and health care. It has ministered to its members and challenged the misuse of power. The picture is mixed.

The setting of today’s gospel is the last supper. Jesus has washed his disciples’ feet, Judas has left to carry out his intention of betraying his master, and Jesus is with the eleven – and possibly a few others. He’s speaking to a small group. We can think on a small scale as well and ask how well members of a parish congregation fulfil the Lord’s command to love each other. In most

congregations a great deal of loving and caring goes on. It's largely about sensitivity: being aware when someone is happy, sad, uncertain, lonely, or whatever, and responding appropriately. It's finding the middle way between over-familiarity and detachment. It does take personal involvement, much more than just coming to church for an hour on Sunday to sing the hymns, say the prayers, listen to the sermon and receive communion. But it's part of belonging to a worshipping community in a broader sense. It's not easy, and we all relate more readily to some people than to others.

Christian love can be shared not just on a one-to-one basis. Church members come together for worship, for activities, in committees, in Mothers Union, for Messy Church, for study and so on. What is done and the way it is done can be expressions of Christian love, building up both individuals and the group.

What is new about Jesus' commandment to love one another? Similar commandments can be found in the ancient Jewish law: love your neighbour as yourself. Other faiths say much the same thing. The clue is in the second part of what Jesus says: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Jesus showed his love by offering his life for people, and that makes it possible for Christians to love as he commands. He was not just giving an example; he was enabling his followers to be released from sin and death, and enter a life where a new quality of love can be given and received. He is now present in this world through his love which we share and show to others. We won't get it perfectly right in this world but we shouldn't stop trying!