

By this, everyone will know...

What are we to make of this comment made by Jesus to his disciples?

'By this', he says, 'everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'
(John 13:35)

So what does love look like?

And who is included in his command: love one another as I have loved you?

Our human nature leads us to love more easily those closest to us: we love our family (most of the time), we love our friends. It is sad to say that some Christians have interpreted this command to mean: love *only* my family, my friends, people of my culture. Love only people who speak my language or belong to my ethnic group, love only people of my neighbourhood or my village, or whose skin is the same colour as mine.

We quite naturally seek to spend time with people who are 'like us'. Human beings left to our basest instincts are by nature tribal in our relationships with others. We seek to find our 'in-group' and we are happy to defend it and to demonise and exclude those who we judge as 'not belonging'.

We have seen this mechanism at work to devastating effect in the years of Nazi domination in Germany. The Jews were seen as outsiders, as not belonging and it did not take much propaganda for the vast majority of good and upright German citizens to merely stand by as their neighbours were deported, their shops destroyed, their livelihoods and even their lives taken away. It was probably easier not to see, not to look, not to notice, not to put your head above the parapet—and to take refuge in a notion of 'looking after our own.'

We have seen that mechanism at work in the 1990s in Bosnia, when those who had been neighbours and colleagues turned savagely on those they deemed to be different, not one of us.

We see it in the political rhetoric of our day: in the United States, in Britain, in Europe, in Italy... words and slogans which want us to believe that there is an US and a THEM; and that the THEM is somehow less human, less deserving, less 'good' in some way, than the US of the tribe... however vaguely that tribe might be defined... Lombards, Italians, citizens, white people?

We are encouraged to be afraid of those who in some way are perceived as 'not like us.' And then it becomes easy to blame these so-called 'others' for the problems and ills of our present society. We find ourselves unable to have reasonable conversations about the common good, about what we need to do, about how to deal compassionately and justly with the complexities of our life together on this earth.

Jesus's words this morning present to us a real challenge, because when we read the whole of scripture, and we examine the whole of Jesus's life and ministry, his words and his actions, we realise that he is NOT encouraging us to love only those people we find it easy to be with, or only those people who do nice things for us, or only those people who share our language and our culture.

His command to love is NOT a command to feel a warm and fuzzy emotion about everyone we meet. That is clearly impossible. That would mean that love is merely a product of our hormones flaring up.

Love is more than just emotion.

Love is a series of actions and attitudes.

And that is precisely why Jesus can say: By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

The ways in which the disciples speak and act, and treat one another is meant to show in a concrete and visible way what it means to be a follower of Jesus, what it means to be a person and a community of people who intend to speak and think and act as Jesus did.

We see in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 11: 1-18) the disciples struggling to do just this. They too want to fall into the US and THEM trap. For them it would be much more comfortable to think that Jesus and his message of salvation was just for the Jews. And yet, God will not allow them to stay in their comfortable bubble.

The vision that Peter has is a reminder that the way of Christ involves the way we interact with the whole world. Peter is pressed, almost against his will, to sit and eat with non-Jews, to share food and fellowship with those he instinctively considered to be THEM and not US.

Our reading from Acts teaches us that it is not for us, as individuals or the church, to retreat into a protective little bubble, pretending that what happens in the society and the world around is nothing to do with us.

One of the grave mistakes which the church made, both Catholic and Protestant, during the the rise of Nazism and the war years is that we were too afraid to speak up, too afraid of being persecuted ourselves to defend those whose very lives were at risk, too busy thinking that our business was just about spiritual things. And at its worst, there were those who would claim to be Christians who happily bought into the racism, homophobia and anti-semitism of the Nazi and Fascist message.

So, at our worst, we twisted the gospel message to justify exclusion and discrimination and simply not caring. And to put ourselves in the best light, we were simply too busy with our own stuff to bother about anyone else. We failed at our task as Christians to be light in the darkness, and to believe in and live completely Jesus's message of justice, of hospitality, of concern for the poor, the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned; we failed to live out his message that we are all made in the image of God and are all deserving of compassion and respect.

Our reading from the Book of Revelation (21.1-6) this morning speaks about a new heaven and a new earth..an earth transformed by the presence of God among us.

We pray each Sunday, 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done ON EARTH as it is in heaven'.

As Christians and as the church we have no choice but to be involved in the world we live in, because the will of God does not happen on earth as if by magic. It happens because people like you and me are willing to take some risks for the kingdom.

I received some months ago an email from the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In it, he expressed his concern for the increasing rise of the far right in Europe, and he mentioned Italy specifically. He expressed concern at the increase of racist and xenophobic language, the rise of nationalism, and the loss of respect for international law.

I think it is fair to say that some of what is happening today looks very much like what was happening in the 20s and 30s.

As you know, yesterday Milan hosted the visit of some European leaders known to be part of the right--- and you could say the far right. Some volunteer associations organised a protest through the displaying of banners. Some messages were more edifying than others. But the need for protest felt real and necessary.

It was suggested that we as a church should put a banner too. I really wanted to do it, because I think it is important for us to 'be present', and for the message of God's kingdom of justice and peace and hospitality and love to be heard. I think it is important for us to consider how and when to make our voice heard in the public sphere.

Private faith is as good as no faith—and if we are happy to hide our light under a bushel we are failing to fulfill the commandment to love.

We didn't put up a banner in the end, I'm rather sorry to say. There was little time for real discussion and consultation with Council. I suspect that some of us probably would have been enthusiastic, and others would have said we can't be political. We settled for a small sign in our outside noticeboard.

But the events of this weekend and our scripture readings today raise the question for us as individuals and as a church: what does love look like?

How will people know we are disciples of Jesus if we do not make known our absolute commitment to justice, to helping the poor and disadvantaged, to the equal dignity of people from every language and nation and ethnicity?

How will they know we are his disciples if we are too afraid to make some waves in his name and to participate fully in the values of his kingdom here on earth at this time and in this place?

By this, says Jesus, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Vickie Sims, All Saints' Anglican Church, 19th May 2019 10.30 am Eucharist

A prayer for the week:

Eternal God,
whose Son Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life:
grant us to walk in his way,
to rejoice in his truth,
and to share his risen life;
who is alive and reigns, now and for ever. Amen.