

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 29th April 2018
Easter 5 YrB

Beloved, let us love one another.

I've been reflecting this week on how complex love is. We've been hearing over the past couple of weeks of the heart wrenching story of Alfie Evans, the 23 month old terminally ill toddler being cared for at Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool. The pain and anguish surrounding that little boy. His parents going through every court in the land to be allowed to take Alfie for other treatments; the hospital staff attempting to stand up for a little scrap of flesh who could not speak for themselves. Both sides acting out of love and care. Both being abused and cared for again out of love. Then, very sadly we heard of Alfie's death at the end of this week after having his life support system removed. Nowhere in this sad story was there anything but love. Yet within the story there was much pain and anger and anguish; many tears have been shed and cross words uttered, yet all out of love.

Love then becomes quite complex, sprouting all sorts of other emotions that can be either constructive and supportive or destructive and abusive. Or maybe that is when love stops and other emotions come into play. Out of love we have gone to war and we have overcome insurmountable problems to form new relationships and creations. I wonder if the Korean talks this week will be an example of love overcoming insurmountable problems. Time will tell I suppose.

If we can just sit for a moment and think about how complex love is and then wonder what it is God calls us to.

Jesus says in John's Gospel that he gives us a new commandment, to love one another as he has loved us. In the reading from the First Letter of John we had this morning, love is the central tenant in the writer's exhortation to his reader. In this passage he emphasises its importance in the life of faith, 'whoever does not love does not know God'. To love then is the key of faith. But this is not a romantic or childish thing. This love is a defining gift, given us by God through Jesus Christ his Son. This is a love that means we have God living in and with us.

Abide is an old English word (*abidan*) meaning to remain, to continue, to dwell, to encounter, to sustain, to suffer. This is a pretty intense relationship God is calling us to, one that will lead to us being changed, for this is definitely not the norm in the human condition. What God is calling us to is a better us, a better you and me, calling us to be Christlike in his love and his power.

When Jesus uses the image of the vine and the branches in today's teaching from John it too is quite an intimate relationship he calls us to. To be a branch attached to this vine, to be a part of Jesus can't get much more intimate. From this close relationship comes expectations. The expectation voiced here is to bear fruit. That word comes up again, abide; this close binding relationship that is pretty intense between us as the branches, Jesus as the vine and God as the vine-grower. And what is this fruit we should bear? It is love.

It is just after this passage, a few verses later that Jesus say if we obey his command we will stay in his love and what is his command? That we love one another. However hard that may be it is through this love that we are defined. And this is a hard love. It is a love that took Jesus to the cross of Good Friday and it is a love we celebrate in the breaking of bread and sharing of the common cup. It is love we should be anxious to share and it is in this burgeoning desire that the fruitfulness of the branch is measured.

Philip lived in this love so much that as God called him to share the word with complete strangers he didn't question it once. There is no negotiation, "Get up and go" said the angel and Philip went; he didn't just go, he ran in expectancy and a burning desire to share the word of God. It is no accident the passage referred to here is the sacrificial lamb, in Christian parlance, Jesus, prophesied in Isaiah. Jesus is the sacrificial lamb that was led to the slaughter. I wonder if someone stopped you and asked if you could unpack a passage of scripture how you would react. If you were told by God to do something would you do it? Should I say as God tells you to do something to you listen and do it? How do you bear fruit for Jesus? Where might you be in this story?

We do need to have an answer to these sorts of questions. This is what Jesus implores us to be doing, sharing the good news of Jesus and this may be why the church in the Western World is struggling, because we are not answering the call. Last week's passage spoke of the good shepherd and I explored the possibility that we are all shepherds, all part of a team of shepherds who are called to lead, to stewardship and to be a visionary for Jesus. These are all carried out in the love of God and can only be lovingly carried out in God.

Fr Michael asked you the other week what kind of faith you had. Was it a cosy faith, a comfortable faith or an active, dynamic, costly faith? If you were wondering what defines these views of faith, then look no further than these words of John. Don't in John's words be liars, saying you love God and doing nothing about it. If we love God such a stance needs a response, an action that changes us, renews us in the power of the spirit, maybe like Philip, it even spirits us away to proclaim the love of God in a new place.