

Every so often someone asks me why there are four gospels. Surely it would be much less confusing if we only had one? Then, for example, we wouldn't find ourselves in the situation where, on the Sunday after Easter we had a reading from John about Jesus appearing to the disciples and then later to Thomas – and then the following Sunday we had the same event recorded by Luke, but without Thomas! There are lots of places where the gospel accounts of the same thing differ. Why couldn't the learned fathers who put the Bible together sort out the discrepancies and give us one neat and tidy narrative? Then we'd know exactly what happened and what to believe.

But if we did have only one gospel we would lose much more than we'd gain. The four evangelists were each writing with a different purpose and for different audiences. Mark, who was a companion of Peter and was probably a Gentile, wrote to inspire and encourage Gentile Christians facing persecution by the Romans. Matthew was an educated Jew, possibly a scribe. His gospel was for other Jewish Christians, and he wanted to prove to them that Jesus really was the Messiah, and that they had been right to convert to Christianity. Luke's purpose was different again. He was a companion of Paul, which gave him a different perspective from Mark, and he was writing to explain Christianity to a single person, a senior Roman official named Theophilus. These three all had a common approach – they were essentially telling the story of Jesus' life and death as a historical, chronological sequence.

John's gospel was quite different. John was a disciple, unlike the other three, so his writing was based on direct experience. But he was arguing against the heresies that were beginning to spring up, and he wrote philosophy and theology. He starts from concrete 'real world' facts: birth, water, bread, and moves through symbolism to spiritual understanding. His key words are 'life', 'death', and above all, 'love'. Our gospel reading today is John's eight-verse distillation of Jesus' message of love, and the epistle, also written by John, expands on this.

This isn't love in the loose sense in which we often use the word: we love that dress, or that music, or that food. That sort of love is dictated by personal preference and pleasure; it is selective and it can change. Jesus' commandment is unconditional. If you keep my commandment you will love God's children. That's very familiar, but the reverse is equally true and much sharper. Unless you love God's children, you are not keeping the commandment and you do not love God.

It's often easier to 'love' people when we don't know them well, or at all. We can construct an idealised mental image of them, with nothing difficult, unacceptable or flawed. When I was at Sunday School sixty years ago we were shown lots of pretty pictures of Melanesian orphan babies and encouraged to love them and contribute our pennies to help them. But nobody suggested that we should think about or contribute to the children who lived in the slum half a mile away. We had nothing to do with them, and they never came to 'our' church. John's gospel roots us in reality. We're not even beginning to love God unless we genuinely love the messy, awkward, embarrassing, imperfect, infuriating individuals close at hand.

For many years I used to go to Wantage to talk to a wise old nun, and sometimes we would discuss religious life, many aspects of which I found very attractive. But Sister Ann Julian was ruthlessly realistic. The most difficult part of religious life wasn't the poverty, or the chastity, or

even the obedience. It was the community! You couldn't choose the people you lived with. They were your sisters in Christ; God had called them just as Jesus called his disciples, and had given them the commandment to love one another. If Sister Winifred's habit of sucking her teeth, or Sister Barbara's slightly out-of-tune singing drove you to distraction, no matter. You were to love them notwithstanding, maybe for fifty or sixty years.

Love means getting involved. It means respecting everyone. 'I call you friends, not servants', said Jesus. It means bringing the outsiders into our own community, because God loves them just as much as us. It means taking time, being concerned, valuing their opinions, walking in their shoes, putting yourself out, seeing Christ in them. It means taking risks, being misunderstood, being hurt and rejected, going against the flow, losing so-called friends, giving away what you most wanted to keep. Ultimately it may cost you everything, including your life.

Last week's gospel used the analogy of the vine to represent the entire community – all of humanity, everyone loved by God even if they do not realise this. Love is the sap keeping the plant alive. It doesn't just flow up and down (between Father and Son, or from the disciples to Jesus). It flows out through all the branches and leaves, towards every individual person. We are all linked to each other and to God by the constant flow of love.

In any woody plant, including vines, the sap flows just under the bark – the skin of the plant. (That's why hollow, split trees can still produce leaves and fruit.) If you scratch the bark, you'll see the sap. If (metaphorically) you scratch a Christian, you should see love. That's what Jesus wants of us. That's how we must behave. That's the question for reflection every day: have my actions and my thoughts been loving? Where have I failed in love? How can I learn to love more fully? How do I measure up to the standard: 'Love one another, as I have loved you'?