

Sunday 24 February, 2019

Love - The Radical New Commandment

A sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, The Revd Canon Christopher Carolane, on the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Reading: Luke 6:27-38

“All you need is love” – so wrote John Lennon and Paul McCartney in 1967.

When they were at their peak, the Beatles appeared as philosophers of their time. But the love of which they sang was the love of “Flower Power”, free love, drugs, sex and rock and roll. It bore no meaningful resemblance to the love Jesus Christ proclaimed when he was on Earth.

“Tell me master”, asked the cheeky lawyer who was trying to catch Jesus out, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

He said to him, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*’³⁸ *This is the greatest and first commandment.*’³⁹ *And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*⁴⁰ *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* (Matt 22.37-39)

If Lennon and McCartney’s love was all about free love – love with no constraints, what kind of love was the love of which Jesus was speaking?

The answer is in today’s Gospel reading and is both radical and shocking.

Luke 6:27 *“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.³¹ **Do to others as you would have them do to you.**”*

“Love your *enemies*?” Jesus can’t be serious! Surely?

Love your *enemies, do good to those who HATE you???*

How can *anyone* be expected to do **that**?

Jesus' summary of the law, to love God and love others was not new. Both of these commandments were in the Old Testament. You might recall that on another occasion a different lawyer asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked the lawyer what was written in the law and this time the *lawyer* answered with the same words:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And Jesus said to him, *"You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."* (Luke 10.27-28)

But then, wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus another question, *"And who is my neighbor?"* (Luke 10.29)

Those of us who know the New Testament know that Jesus then told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Most commonly I think we take from it that we must love everyone, even those who don't love us. But I think that through 20th or 21st eyes we actually overlook just how radical this story is as well. The story is about a good *Samaritan*. It wasn't about a good *Israelite*. The Jews and the Samaritans were enemies. The distaste for each other was so great that Jews wouldn't even walk through Samaria. They wouldn't even talk to each other, yet in Jesus' explanation of who a neighbor is, he chose a Samaritan to be the hero of the story.

Some of you may know of Corrie ten Boom, a beautiful Dutch Christian lady who, with her Father and sister, Betsie, hid Jews from the Nazi's in their Watch Maker's shop in Holland during the Second World War. The family was caught and she and her sister were sent to Ravensbruck, and then to Auschwitz death camp in Germany. There they were treated horribly. They were abused, stripped naked, made to shower and toilet in front of the male guards who mocked them, and they were beaten and starved - two beautiful, middle-aged, unmarried, Christian women. Sadly Betsie died in the camp, but through a clerical error, Corrie was released just prior to the end of the war. It was their firm faith in the Lord Jesus that enabled Corrie and Betsie to stay strong during their hellish ordeal at the hands of the Nazis.

After the war, Corrie ten Boom spoke about her ordeals and of the strength she found in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus. She spoke in Holland, other parts of Europe, Australia and the United States. She described in her book *"The Hiding Place"*, how people were hungry for the gospel of Jesus and the message of forgiveness that Jesus offers to *all* who put their trust in him.

She wrote:

"... the place where the hunger was greatest was Germany. Germany was a land in ruins, ...

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing. Betsie's pain-blانched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message Fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, Jesus has washed my sins away!"

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often ... the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

"Even as the angry vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him....Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness....And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives along with the command, the love itself."¹

This is the wonder of God's love for us, that our sins are forgiven, even though we don't deserve it. Because we are forgiven by the grace of God and know his overpowering love in our lives, we are able to truly love others as he has called us to do.

Think again about the night Jesus was arrested prior to his crucifixion. After Jesus had shared his final meal with his disciples, he took off his outer garment, put a towel around his waist and washed his disciples feet. This was a most beautiful act of servant love for his closest friends. In so doing, Jesus demonstrated his servant love for them. Have you ever pondered the fact that he also washed Judas' feet – the one who would betray him, stab him in the back and turn him over to the authorities for 30 pieces of silver? Despite the treachery towards Jesus in Judas's heart, Jesus still washed his feet. He did not stop loving him.

Remember his words from today's Gospel: *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Luke 6:27)*

¹ Ten Boom, Corrie, *The Hiding Place*, Hodder and Stoughton, Great Britain, 1971, p220

It was only a short time after Jesus had washed their feet that he gave them what he described as the new commandment:

“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.” (John 13:34-35)

We are commanded to love one another *just as Jesus has loved us.*

Again, recall for a moment the Lord Jesus’ love for his enemies as he hung on the cross in bitter agony and spiritual pain. He looked down at those who had called for his crucifixion and those who had nailed the nails into his hands and feet and he prayed, *“Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing!”* (Luke 23:34)

This is love of enemy *par excellence!*

As Christian men and women we are called to love radically. We are not called to love with a cutesy mushy love like the love the Beatles sang about or the kind of love parodied by Charles Schulz when he wrote, “All you need is love. But a little chocolate now and then doesn’t hurt.”

Jesus said it isn’t enough just to love those who love us. Everyone does that. Our love must go beyond. It must go deeper. It must be love gracious love – love that isn’t deserved, modeled on Jesus’ undeserved love for us.

Let us so resolve to love as Jesus’ commands us to love.