

Easter 6
10/52015

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

John 15:9-17

“As I have loved you...”

“This is my commandment: that you love one another.”

The rhetoric of “love” is often very vague, non-specific or ambiguous. It easily becomes sentimental on the one hand or, on the other hand, we broaden its meaning and application to things like “tough love” – that kind of love which declares to the one who is being “loved,” “This hurts me more than it hurts you!”

What is the love of which Jesus speaks? “... Love one another *as I have loved you*”. Okay. But Jesus then almost hopelessly confuses the matter with his next declaration: “No one has greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”. This is unhelpful because Jesus himself literally does just this: he dies, as we have subsequently come to understand, “for his friends”. It is unhelpful because it lends itself to adoption into stories of heroism; we need only think of the way in which this Scripture verse has been taken up as an interpretation of the loss of life by soldiers in war. “Greater love hath no man” is inscribed on the Stone of Remembrance in the Shrine of Remembrance here in Melbourne, and doubtless in many other similar war memorials.

Whatever might be said about Jesus’ own laying down of his life, and the laying down by soldiers of their lives in war, the problem with what Jesus says for us here and now is the way in which it can be heard to over-dramatise the act of love. As a statement by itself it is true enough but it seems to locate the work of love in a place where most of us are never actually going to be: the heroic moment, the moment in which we are called to risk or even lose our life in the act of seeking to save another, as a father might do who swims into out to sea to retrieve the child dragged out by a rip, or a soldier might do to drag her wounded comrade out of enemy fire. Whether or not such moments are in fact real acts of love is not in question. But they are not, for the most part, real *life* – at least, the real life of most of us. To declare “no one has greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” can suggest that this is about the *end* of our life, the possibility of the need to die that others might live. In the Scriptures, however, thought about life and death is for the most part not thought about when or *whether* ours hearts are beating or not. Rather, it is a matter of *how* one’s heart beats – what rhythm it beats, according to which we then march.

To lay down one’s life for friends, as the Jesus of John’s gospel puts it, is put by the Jesus of the Synoptic gospels as “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me”. The laying down of one’s life is a manner of *living* and not simply the moment at which we finally die. This is a living which knows not only self but others, and not others as we imagine or want them to be, but others as they actually are, even when in this or that way they seem to be radically wrong and so to require of us more than seems “fair” or “reasonable”. To lay down my life for my friends is to allow where they are to be *my* problem – and not my problem to *fix* but the unavoidable cause of my “death”, so-called: the occasion of my cross to bear. This may be a literal death as in those rare

“heroic” cases, or a metaphorical one, in the much more common and mundane challenges of everyday life together.

Any talk about self-denial runs the risk of being heard to suggest submission to abuse by others. But this is not the point. We need to acknowledge this danger in such talk, to watch for it in situations where it might arise, and to act where appropriate. But again, for the most part, these are extreme cases which cloud the issue for most of the rest of us most of the time. At the heart of the question of what it means to love is understanding why love is here spoken of in terms of a *commandment*. Our familiarity with love as sentiment, or even simply as lust in one form or another, also clouds our vision. These emotions and drives come naturally. We cannot be commanded to “fall” in love or even in lust; it just happens, and we generally like it. But the love of which Jesus speaks is not natural or appealing in this way. It must be called forth, *commanded*, because it contradicts the natural. It contradicts our over-estimation of the other, or our under-estimation, or even the presumption to estimate what another person is. The *commandment* to love contradicts *our* desires for them, and so our presumption to know what they think or desire or need.

But the command to love still remains abstract until a *specific* contradiction enters our lives – until we feel ourselves “*contra-dicted*”, hear ourselves literally “spoken against”, have our own sense of the world and how it should fit together challenged. That is, the command to love comes *as* a command at the very point *I* feel unloved, when I have not been heard, when I feel disempowered, when I am disoriented by the fact that the world – which means those around me – is not as I imagined or desire. Drawing on an observation from Rowan Williams (*Christ on trial*): At such points I naturally tend to act out a longing to be somewhere else or, perhaps more precisely in such cases, out of the longing that *you* be somewhere else. For it is in this moment that the specific shape of what love demands then becomes clear in all of its unpalatableness. The command to love is the command *to be where you are*, with others who are not where you want them to be.

“No greater love has anyone, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” In this way Jesus describes his own way of being and, of course, the actual playing-out of his ministry in the cross. The logic of what I have said about love has its basis in the ministry of Jesus himself: “...as I have loved you.” We will miss this, however, if we remain with abstracted ideas about the love and death of Jesus – as if it were about Jesus’ love for “everybody”, or that Jesus “had to die” as part of God’s plan, so that he is a special case we don’t have to consider. Against this is the doctrine of the incarnation, which holds not merely that Jesus was God become “human”, but a *specific* human being in a specific time and place in the midst of specific people. Jesus the human being doesn’t just “die”; Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and the scribes contradict him and plot his death. He is not merely “arrested”, but what he taught is contradicted in betrayal by Judas and denial by Peter. If Jesus’ life and death is a thoroughgoing act of love, then it is so within these specific relationships. If Jesus dies for love’s sake, it is for the love of Caiaphas and Annas, of Judas and Peter, of Mary and Martha and Magdalene and so on, all of whom are not just the potential beneficiaries of his death but, in different ways, the *cause* of his death: “This my body, *broken* by you...” Jesus dies in the way he does because he insists on being with them, “as they are”.

The cross, then, does not simply effect a divine salvation as if by a holy magic; it gives shape to love. It is Jesus “being where he is”. The shape of love Jesus’ persistence with and for both friend and foe. The Christian life, correspondingly, is cruciform – it is cross-shaped. It involves that kind of dying to ourselves which is necessary if any human community is to survive error and injustice – particularly the error and injustice of “someone else”.

And this brings us to the importance of the church. It does not matter whether other faith communities come to the same conclusion about love as the church, or whether the church generally fails miserably at living what is at the heart of its being. If others can know this truth by other means, we celebrate with them. If the church fails at living the truth, we are simply all the more reminded of how imperative it is that we continue to work at it. The church is a community which is learning not simply *how* to love, but the *difficulty* of love.

Love is difficult, and it is difficult for the church. It will be difficult for us to deal with each other when we have to make very concrete, far-reaching and doubtless very disruptive decisions about what to do with our property resources. It is difficult to deal with each other when we begin to express ourselves in relation to things we need to have in common – and we might think here of the conversation we have planned this morning about worship. And yet it is precisely in such potentially conflicted situations that we are called to do something extraordinary. This is not the heroic feat of agreeing to sell up, or agreeing to soldier on on this site, or with a stroke of genius achieving just the balance in worship that pleases everyone. The extraordinary thing is in the manner of engagement – feeling ourselves to be in the right, but not requiring that others recognise it. Or, in more evangelical terms – believing not only that I am justified by grace alone but also that you, who are clearly wrong in what you do or think, are *also* justified by grace and not condemned for the error I see in you. This is the fruit Jesus appoints us to bear “fruit that will last” (John 15.16) because it reflects that love which overcomes all things. *This* is the extraordinary thing.

There is not much between how we stand before God and how others stand before us. It is because we do not understand this that we often turn out to be lousy lovers. The command to love comes precisely because we need constantly to be called to love. This call comes again and again in God’s *hope* that we might see: as we are to God – claimed in grace – so others are to be to us; as God is to us – claiming through grace – so are we to be to others.

“...as I have loved you” is where we begin, and the end towards which we move, if the “love” which at its heart is to be meaningful, and effective.

Let our prayer be, then, that our hands do not fumble the gift of such extraordinary trust – the gift of each other to love – that the work of our hands might finally be found to match where love began, and never ends. Amen.
