

Hearing Jesus

[Jesus said] ⁹ *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.* ¹⁰ *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.* ¹¹ *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.* ¹² *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* ¹³ *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.* ¹⁴ *You are my friends if you do what I command you.* ¹⁵ *No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.* ¹⁶ *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.* ¹⁷ *These things I command you, so that you will love one another. (John 15:9-17 ESV)*

Our Gospel today continues the account of Jesus' teaching his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. Remember that this is a tense time – a few days back there's been the celebrations we know as Palm Sunday – and then Jesus seems to go a bit crazy and causes an uproar in the temple overturning tables and throwing things around – the days of teaching and controversy keep happening – tricks and traps are laid for Jesus but he cleverly avoids them – but the tension intensifies – the cursed fig tree is a harbinger of something, but what exactly? – and then Jesus washes the disciples' feet and radically interrupts and changes the Passover ritual – all the while teaching about endings and beginnings – temples will be destroyed – the Son of Man will come in glory – and now Jesus is still teaching – in a short while he'll be arrested and we know what happens next.

Following on from vine and branches, Jesus now talks about love and commandments and joy. We're moving into the consequences of following Jesus now and I'm uneasy. In fact I'm wondering whether the Gospel is gospel or is it really just a new law?

There is unease – hesitancy – caution – when we link 'love' and 'command' together. The association doesn't fit naturally it seems to me. I can think of the reaction at home if I walked in the door announced to my family that I command them to love me! I suspect the response might be anything but loving – and the paradox might be that such a reaction is a loving one! I think of countries or cults where the citizens or followers are commanded to love the leader – and do so – and it's not something I want to be involved with. And I can recall accounts of counselling in which people in dysfunctional or abusive relationships combine words such as 'command' and 'love' and now I'm being asked to help by somehow breaking that link.

And what is this love that we're talking about? That's hard to define in English because love is used in so many ways and I would hope that we love chocolate, sport, our pet, favourite drink, and family rather differently – yet it's all love! We also associate love with feelings and an atmosphere or mood which is often romantic – and this fixation on us and our feelings means that love seems opposed to commands. For many people love is like a will-of-the-wisp that flits and flies at its own whim and as such is something to be searched for and cherished when found but hardly commanded.

My third unease is about Jesus himself. Why does he say things that cause us to pause, to think, to question? Sometimes his sayings are really quite hard. We have to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man – really? If my right eye or hand causes me to sin, pluck it out or cut it off! (I can remember thinking that I didn't really have to come to grips with what he was saying because I'm left handed!) And what Jesus says about family – about fights within – about putting him first in every relationship – doesn't seem too friendly to family or anything. Just a bit earlier in the teaching, Jesus said that he was the only way to God – no other person or way is the right way. So Jesus now putting love and commandments and joy together and me wondering what he really means isn't all that unusual.

How about you?

Did you hear what Jesus said as law or Gospel? Are you comforted, resting in Jesus' declaration that he's chosen you or are you wondering what it means to love one another and is there an escape clause somewhere? Or did some other thing pop into your mind when you heard these words from Jesus? Or was it like background music in the shops – heard but not really – and now you're thinking 'I did hear it but I don't remember what'? And have some of you just said in your heads 'I know what Jesus says! I – love – you!'

My point for at the moment is that we, by nature, want God's gifts but not him and strange as this may seem, people – who by nature use words to create our own little gods which are really reflections of ourselves – can even listen to the words of the bible and not want to meet the speaker.

When we call the bible the Word of God, we are saying that no matter who wrote the book or letter we're reading, the speaker is God and we can be even more precise than that for Jesus himself says – there he is again saying these tough things – and he's saying that if we listen to the Scriptures – all of them – law, prophets, psalms, eye witness accounts, apostolic testimonies and letters – we are listening to him for he is the Word of God – this Word made flesh who dwells among us.

So that means that if I hear you or in my case, Charlotte, put 'command' and 'love' in close proximity to each other I am listening cautiously and may even reject what I'm hearing – but when it comes to Jesus, I am going to listen – even if I struggle with what he's saying until I understand something of what he's saying to me.

We know the disciples – those first hearers – didn't understand or obey Jesus when he was alive and when he died there was no anticipated waiting for him to return – just disappointment, fear, and futility. That changed with the message of an empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection and as he came into focus through words and through his supper so he was listened to and what he said was recalled. And that is what happens here as we worship. Jesus comes to us and speaks and nourishes us.

We listen to him because his words are true and his words are powerful. He talks about commandments and love and joy and we discover *his* obedience to the Father, *his* sacrifice for there is no greater love than *he* had by sacrificing himself for us all(!) and *he* keeps taking the initiative by coming to us and making us friends. Christians are not blind followers of a cult leader or fearful citizens of a heavenly commonwealth but friends of God – not servants and certainly not pets – but people God has extended a warm and loving relationship with – a friendship so that we might enjoy him and his love. This not a Pollyanna – unrealistic – sugary – love – but a relationship that is genuine and real because it takes us and this world into account.

What is commanded here is necessary because we are still plagued by self love – the desire to be loved by others – to be the centre of everything – to be our own selfish god – and give little back. Thus Jesus reminds us that love is action and sacrifice. We need such guidance to set agendas and plans but that won't save us or make God love us because underneath are God's everlasting arms – a foundation of grace and mercy. Jesus provides help with what he commands – he doesn't set us up to fail – when he reminds us that God answers prayer so that the fruit of love may continue.

When it is Jesus – and only Jesus – who is the speaker of these type of words then we should listen and act. The words will hit us differently depending on our situations, on what is happening in our lives. Sometimes we need to focus on the commandment – the action – the task and stop being lazy. At other times we need strength to continue to love and sacrifice because it can be hard when we are persecuted, unappreciated, used and abused and so Jesus reminds us of his love and his sacrifice for us.

What does Jesus say to you today?

Trust him. He won't let you down.