

## Sermon 27 October 2024 'Unconditional Love'

### 1 John 4:13-17 John 14:15-21

This gospel passage illustrates John's take on love. Essentially, love is the basis for everything. The inter-relationship between God, Jesus and mankind are bound together and underpinned by love. And there is a theme coming through in his observation about love and that is commitment. To John love is not something you can practise with a few well-chosen words; it is something that must be backed up by obedience, a commitment to the commandments given by Jesus: *'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.'* John 14:15. There are no qualifications. That is a straight-up statement that carries with it an expectation of adherence and obedience.

It reminds me of the love called for in a marriage ceremony. As I say to couples preparing for marriage, on the day of your wedding your relationship changes, big time! It moves from a conditional to an unconditional relationship as expressed through the vows they exchange with one another: 'I, Roderick, take you Penelope, to be my wife.....for better or for worse.' It is an unconditional vow which expresses the nature of their relationship as they move forward as husband and wife.

The vows are in a similar vein to the commandment of Jesus to love one another when we subscribe to the Christian faith. John is making the point that our love must also be unconditional, no exceptions, no caveats. That is his simple commandment to us.

However, this is not at all easy, and in fact it is extremely difficult. I mean it is hard enough practising unconditional love with our nearest and dearest. Let's be honest. I love my kids fully and completely but I am sure I am not the only parent who occasionally finds that love somewhat tested. And I am very sure that my kids have very much the same experience of me! But here is Jesus telling us we really should be practising that same unconditional love with anyone and everyone. As I have frequently said, actually putting into practice what Jesus expects of us is challenging to say the least.

However, Jesus being the very kind chap that he is, promises to send some help in the form of the Holy Spirit. *'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will never leave you. This is the Holy Spirit.'* There are several facets to the Holy Spirit but here Jesus focuses on the Holy Spirit as an agent of help. The Greek word John uses is *parakletos*, which is largely untranslatable. Other words, other than 'help,' used to convey the intent are comforter, advocate and counsellor. But 'helper' is as good a translation as any.

When we help someone, invariably we are assisting them in dealing with something which is an issue for them, perhaps even something of a challenge for them at the time. Well, as we have already noted, practising love in the manner expected of us in following the commandment of Jesus is certainly something of a challenge, and so I am inclined to think that the translation of 'helper' is very appropriate.

Jesus makes an interesting point where he says, *'This is the Holy Spirit, whom the world cannot receive, because it isn't looking for him, and doesn't recognise him'* John 14:17. What he is saying here is that in order to receive the Holy Spirit, to receive God's power, we have to be tuned into him. Makes sense really.

When watching a game of rugby on TV or perhaps reading a report of the game in the newspaper, I often marvel at the perceptive comments made by commentary team or the reporters. They make observations which I have completely missed. Why? Because they are tuned in to the game in a way that I am not.

Because they are immersed in the game in a way that I am not. Dangerous ground using the analogy of rugby in the context of religion, but making a point!

In a similar way, we need to be tuned into the presence and power of God, we need to immerse ourselves in the presence and being of God. We do that through prayer, reading and worship, and even service. Then, and only then, will we experience and enjoy the benefits of God's helper, the Holy Spirit.

I want to finish by harking back to the point John is making about unconditional love and I want to do that through a story. Several centuries ago, several monks were in a cave in a jungle in Asia, meditating on unconditional love. There was the head monk, his brother, and his best friend. The fourth monk was the head monk's adversary – they just could not get along. The fifth monk in the group was a very old monk, so advanced in years that he was not expected to live much longer. And the last monk, well, he was the useless monk. He always snored when he was supposed to be meditating, couldn't remember his chanting, and if he did, he chanted off-key. But the others tolerated him and thanked him for teaching them patience.

One day, a gang of bandits discovered the cave. They wanted to take it over for their base, so they decided to kill all the monks. The head monk, fortunately, was a very persuasive speaker. He managed to persuade the bandits to let all the monks go free, except one, who would be killed as a warning to the other monks not to let anyone know the location of the cave. That was the best deal he could wrangle from the bandits. There was one condition – it had to be one of the group and not the leader himself.

The head monk was left alone for a few minutes to make the awful decision of who should be sacrificed so that the other monks could go free. So who do you think he chose? The useless monk? The old monk? His adversary? His best friend? His brother? Well, he was unable to choose. You see, his love for each and every one of them was exactly the same. He had perfected the meaning of unconditional love.

So we do have to ask ourselves – can we put our hand on our heart and really say that we are able to treat everyone exactly the same, no matter whom they are? Because that is what unconditional love is. We can't pick and choose.

The other point to emphasise is that it is in practising this love for all and sundry that we cement our relationship with God. This is made abundantly clear in our first reading: *'God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.'* 1 John 4:16.

I refer to the quote by Maya Angelou on the back of your service sheets: *'Love is the greatest force in the world. It bridges gaps, heals wounds and transforms lives.'* What she says is absolutely correct, but I would just add that one of the ways love transforms lives is that it makes God accessible for us. For that reason alone, love is the greatest force in the world.

Before I finish, you are probably wanting to know how the story of the monks and bandits finished. Did they kill anyone, and if so, who? Well, the story doesn't relate but I believe that all the bandits were so inspired by the head monk's display of unconditional love that they all became monks themselves! And everyone lived happily ever after.