

Sermon Easter 6 Year B 2018

You can never have enough of a good thing. Or so the saying goes. But if we take that saying seriously we might also have to take in the saying, *all things in moderation.* Easter chocolate is a pretty good thing. But I suspect if we were still eating chocolate eggs at the rate many of us would have on Easter Day then we would be in a pretty bad way. Holidays are a good thing. But have too much of that and we would miss home and family. We would, I suspect become quite bored. And, unless you belonged to the super rich, unlikely to be able to afford a holiday lifestyle. Have too much of a good thing, then what makes it good can lose its punch and power. Have too much of a good thing then it might not seem so special after all.

What we celebrate at Easter time is a pretty good thing!! Indeed, *the best thing* there can be to celebrate! And to this we might say, we *can never* have enough of it; we can never be reminded enough of what a truly wonderful thing God has done in saving us through Christ! And so, during Easter time some words keep coming up: ‘new life’, ‘new creation’, ‘renewal’, ‘new birth’. But all these words can suffer a kind of ‘burn out’ of meaning for us. Too much of a good thing and even these most important words and images and concepts can lose something of their punch and power.

One of the greatest and most important words - a key symbolic word - in our life of faith is ‘love’. ‘Love’, though, also has been corrupted and been exhausted of almost all its meaning. ‘Love’ may be a harder word to restore and redeem than a specifically religious word like baptism or even ‘new life.’ You would probably be aware of the way ‘love’ has been hijacked or equated with sex. I suspect when historians come to write the history of our age they will see the collapse of our culture due in large measure to the devastating effects the distortions to understandings of sex and sexuality, marriage and family we are currently witnessing. One of the profound distortions that affect all those aspects is relating love to *emotion*. Love has become a *feeling* which has seen the unpicking of any understanding of love as either a duty, an action, or as sacrifice. But it *this* understanding of love the Gospel today puts before us today.

As long as we understand love in terms of feeling and emotion and sentiment we'll never get anywhere with understanding what the gospel means when it speaks of love. If we want to reclaim or restore what the gospel means when it speaks of love, then we just have to overcome the overuses and abuses of the word. The word as we find it in the gospel today doesn't represent a feeling. It's not another word for 'like', even 'like a lot'! But as we see Christ lay it out for us today, to love is to be for another, and to act for another. The greatest - the supreme - act of love is the giving of one's life for the other.

Love as self giving, love as gift, love as perfect sacrifice is as far from the love of the sexual revolution as we could care to imagine. But so too the idea of love as *commandment*. For us, alongside ideas of love as a emotion or feeling, is the idea of love as freedom - or really, free to do was you like. But in the gospel, we see true love, authentic love is humble submission - as Christ was to the Father's will - and as obedience: *this is my commandment*. Now, the gospel of John actually gives very little in the way of moral or ethical instruction. In John we don't find sayings such as *turn the other cheek, or feed the hungry or pray for those persecute you*. For the gospel writer John looking to the model of Jesus who obeyed the Father's will even unto death it is enough that the one commandment is, *love one other*. Clearly important because he mentions it twice! *This is my commandment; this is what I command you: love one another*.

Now, we don't easily associate love or friendship with command. Christ calls us friends and so it might seem a bit jarring for this 'so-called' friend to then being telling us what to do, to command us. Once more, for many of us love and friendship lie in our feelings and you can't command a feeling; we don't even command our own feelings truth be told! And so, we need to remind ourselves that love is *not* a feeling, but being for the other and acting for the other.

That is the true measure, the authentic sign of love. Not self-gratification. Not pleasure. Not even freedom. The true measure of love is gift and sacrifice. We see this in God giving his Son. We see this in Christ giving his life. We might have to do a fair bit of work to restore these Christian understandings of love whenever and wherever they are used. But if we ever hope that our lives and our world conform to God's hope for us, then we cannot but put every effort we can to reclaiming a right understanding. If words have been robbed of their meaning - important words and important meanings - it is up to us to show how they might be properly understood and properly lived. Amen.