

Homily for Easter VI – 2020

In today's Gospel we hear our Lord link love and obedience twice - in the first verse and in the last.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments" Jn 14:15 AND

"He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me," Jn 14:21

Now those two statements appear quite straightforward when taken at face value. We can all probably say quite sincerely I love Jesus and I do want to walk in his ways. In actual fact though, it is very difficult indeed for modern believers, especially in the western world, to begin to understand our Lord's meaning. Why? The answer is two fold. Because of the meaning intended by one of the key words and secondly because of the outright rejection of the other. What two words? I hear you ask. The words are 'Love' and 'Commandments'.

Let's think about the word 'love' first. What does it mean? If we can be honest with ourselves for a bit we would have to admit we think of romantic love first, then probably we think of sexual love second (or depending on your stage of life you might reverse those two). Then there is a third love nearly all of us would think of and that is the love one has for one's family and close friends. That's what being children of the 20th and 21st centuries has done to us and what its done to the word love. It's largely about feelings and its primarily to do with romance, sexual intimacy and it has a big place in family life and the life of groups of friends.

Well, that's not what our Lord had in mind at all. He certainly was NOT speaking of romance, sentiment or sexual intimacy and neither was he really speaking of what we call familial love either – the love we have for our families. The love Jesus is speaking of is what is called 'sacrificial love' - the love that puts the needs of others above our own longings, desires, wishes and needs. It is the obedient love that took Jesus to his crucifixion and the total emptying of himself for others, for us.

We want the love that swoons, that feels truly amazing, that is returned in grateful smiles, warm embraces, affectionate kisses and kindly words. And we often think this is what Jesus is asking of us. I should be having hot and cold flushes of emotive delight when I think of Him! No, none of that is really of much or even any importance. Christian love is the loves that answers and responds to the genuine needs of others, especially those to whom we are not, by inclination, attracted.

St Paul gives us the ultimate description of sacrificial love in I Corinthians 13. Paul tells us that this love, sacrificial love, is – patient and kind, never boastful or jealous. It is a love that does not demand its own way; it is never irritable or resentful. It a love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in what is right. It is the love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.

Let us now turn our thoughts to the Commandments of Jesus Christ. Here we are faced with much greater difficulty than we are in coming to terms with the meaning of Christian love. Our difficulty is that we live in a society that gives individual freedom the highest regard. We still know that we should obey the directions of, say, a traffic policemen, as there will be direct and costly consequences of we do not. In most other respects though we belong to a society that gives the greatest freedom of choice to its members that has been the case of any society in any civilisation at any time.

Let me briefly give one example of what I mean. It is now legal in the State of Victoria for any person to choose what gender they are and to have their birth certificate changed to reflect their wishes. So if, for example, I was to announce that I considered myself to be a woman and had changed my birth certificate to indicate ‘sex – female’ ... then, I’m a woman. That is a legal right now granted by the State and nobody can legally challenge my decision. My right overrides all else.

At the very heart of this thinking lies the mantra that truth is not objective. No, its what you make it. I’m sure you will have heard the term ‘your truth’ or ‘my truth.’ Its something we must construct for ourselves. Pilate asked our Lord.. “Truth,... what is truth?” The western world answers overwhelmingly ... “truth is what you make it.”

The church in the western world has, for the most part, very readily accepted this novel approach to truth and, as a result, many of the moral absolutes found in the Bible have been abandoned. There is now what is openly called a ‘new morality’ and in this new morality the overriding principle is live and let live. Be accepting, be understanding, be forgiving, be nice. We are even told, repeatedly, that this is being like Jesus Christ because he was caring, he was understanding, he was accepting, he was forgiving and he was nice.

All that is in the scriptures that does not fit this new narrative of the nice Jesus is dismissed as simply the culture of the ancient world in which even Jesus was trapped and in which he had to couch his message of love and forgiveness. So the concept of ‘obedience’ to the commandments of God and Jesus is a very tall order indeed for many western

Christians. We want the nice, forgiving, understanding, caring, sharing Jesus. Not a Jesus who expects us to obey the 10 Commandments, or to live a life of greater righteousness than even the pharisees and to aim for perfection in all our moral and social dealings.

As a result, these days the 10 commandments, which are the foundation of Judeo-Christian morality, are hardly ever mentioned. Most of us couldn't even recite them. Never mind the fact that in the four gospels our Lord mentioned each one and gave no indication whatsoever that they had been superseded. Never mind that the Apostolic church revised only one of the 10 commandments, and that was only to alter the day of rest from Saturday to Sunday, the day of Resurrection.

Never mind the fact that one of the most attractive features of Apostolic Christianity was the strict personal and communal morality practised by converts with regard to their respect for the sanctity of life, their sexual morality, the status of women, their community morality and their humble obedience to God.

There is a real disconnect in the western church with the Church of the Apostles and with the words of Christ in the gospels. We are told to do our own thing. As long as you don't hurt someone else, what you do is perfectly OK. As well, we expect a comforting, cuddly church where everyone is fully committed to being nice all the time, so that nobody gets offended or upset. The love of the church is the warm inner glow of nice people being nice to each other. The obedience is making sure nobody is ever put on the spot, offended or upset, unless they've done something that none of the 'nice' Christians would ever do. If that's the case, then.. off the back of the bus you go. There's no room for you .

We are faced with a choice, Dear people. Will we be Biblical and Apostolic in our Christian living or will we quietly blend in with the church of being nice?

Let me conclude with 2 quotations from two great Biblical commentators. First, yes you guessed it,.. William Barclay. Barclay sums up his commentary on today's gospel saying .. "For St John there is only one test of love and that is obedience. It was by his obedience that Jesus showed his love of God; and it is by our obedience that we must show our love of Jesus."

Secondly, from C. K. Barrett, a Methodist Minister and one of the greatest Greek scholars ever, who wrote in 1955, what is regarded, still, as the best English commentary on St John's Gospel. Barrett, puts it this way: "St John never allowed love to devolve into a sentiment or emotion. Its expression is always moral and it is revealed in obedience."