

Discipleship series Love is the Key –being equipped for service
John 13:33-35 & Ephesians 4:1-16

During the last four weeks we have been on a journey in discipleship. We have looked at that great commission and the tremendous and demanding job that Jesus entrusted to the apostles;

we have looked at why they were called, these ordinary men, in ordinary occupations, and we can identify with that;

we have looked at having to take risks in Jesus name, getting out of the boat and walking in unfamiliar places;

and last week, we looked at the cost of discipleship,
The cost of true discipleship is high and at sometimes – **very high**. And at those times, the only thing that will help us along our journey, is trusting in the love of God. Love is the key.

What Jesus demands of us in today's gospel reading , is enormous.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another".

How can we love as Jesus loved? He gave up his life for us; For love of us.

At this point in the gospel, Jesus is running out of time to get his message over, and therefore it is imperative that his disciples are **fully equipped for the job they will have to take on..**

Especially, because, you see, just before this reading in John's gospel, we hear of Judas slipping out into the night, to perform his act of treachery,.....to betray Jesus.

Judas, one of Jesus' closest friends. Judas who had walked with Jesus,eaten with Jesus,..... listened to Jesus,seen the wonderful things Jesus did,.....then he turns his back on Jesus, and in disappointment, perhaps, betrays him. And, Jesus knows it is a matter of hours before the authorities come for him.

John's gospel is different to the other three. It is deep, full of meanings, some hidden and difficult, and others more open and easier to understand. For me, John's gospel is a more intimate, more personal gospel and this is what makes these words of Jesus so very powerful .

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.

These words are on the one hand a challenge, and on the other, full of hope and comfort. Here is Jesus, hoping for, **wanting** a full and personal, intimate, relationship with his friends – with us.

Nikki entitled today's readings, "love is the key". The key to being an effective and loving disciple. **BUT** actually, love should be the key to everything we do. If everyone loved their neighbour, totally and unconditionally, we would not be praying week after week for relief and help for war torn Syria, for areas in Africa affected by famine, we would not be praying for abused and sick people.

So how do we love each other as Jesus loved? Our Ephesians' reading calls us to action, to use our gifts. God has given us all different gifts to..... "equip the saints (that's us) for the work of ministry,..... for building up the Body of Christ,..... until all of us **come to the unity of faith**".

We have different gifts and each of us is called to do different things for God. And those different gifts are to be used to build one whole. We are like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. It is only when we achieve our spiritual majority in our eternal life, only when we become spiritually fully "grown up", will we be able to see the completed eternal jigsaw.

Paul, in his famous, much quoted at weddings reading from Corinthians, says that it does not matter, what we **do**, if we speak in tongues, if we move mountains, if we give everything we have away..... it is of absolutely no use at all, we are wasting our time! **if we do not love have love....**

Christ's great commission to the apostles and to us, is to "go out and make disciples of all nations. If we don't, the church will die. We have to take risks, get out of the boat, and walk in places that are unfamiliar to us. To do that, as Alison said last week, there is the cost.... of maybe losing family, friends – who will not understand us.

But the up side is, that we all have God given gifts. We may not have the gift of great oratory; we may not be able to counsel someone, we may not be able to make amazing cakes or jams for harvest festival, but we may be able to sit on the floor and tell stories to children. All gifts are equal in God's eyes. God loves every gift we offer.

We are all equally loved by God. God has no favourites. Jesus did not check if someone went to church or was a good person before he healed them. Jesus only question was "are you going to allow yourself to be touched by love?"

But, to love like this, as Jesus loves, makes us vulnerable. The word "vulnerable" comes from the Latin "Vulnera" – to wound. How wounded was our Saviour? How vulnerable was Jesus, to the machinations of Judas, and the Chief Priests?

Like Jesus, who was badly let down by his friend, people will let us down. We will be lied to. We will be ridiculed.

Are we willing to put ourselves at risk of being hurt.... wounded?

Christ didjust that.

.And.....

He was betrayed by someone he loved.

We are called to love as Jesus loved. And there are some pretty horrid people we are called upon to love. You don't have to like them. But often when we take time to talk to someone whom we do not feel automatically drawn to, a few smiles, gentle questions can break the ice and, who knows, you may find to have something in common.

Also, we, too, must not put up barriers around ourselves and don't **allow** others to come close.

Every time we look at a stranger, someone alien to our particular environment, thinking or beliefs, just think "God loves that person as much as He loves me"

Maybe if you hold out your hand in love and friendship, you will be wounded.

But if you take the risk of loving, then maybe you will be surprised – the other person may add to, enhance your life, free you and***even love you!***”

Richard Rohr – an eminent Christian Catholic Franciscan Theologian, who writes a daily meditation on the web - said something this week, that I think, needs to be passed on. He said, that it seems the work of the Spirit is to keep us vulnerable to life and love itself, and to resist all that destroys that Life. He said thatspirit led people (us) never stop growing and changing..... but then comes the hard bit..... we should never stop recognising the new moment of opportunity. we should never stop recognising the new moment of opportunity. and he goes on to say.....and here I quote directly.....”**How strange to think that so much of religion became worship of the status quo and a neurotic fear of failure.” He goes on to say “It does make sense, though, when we consider that the ego hates and fears change and failure”.**

If we are vulnerable, then as a Paul Bell song says, we will be like supple trees than bend in the wind and when a violent storm comes, we will not snap in two.

How often do we, with determination, turn down opportunities for new worship, changing the furniture, to how we say prayer, how we sing, guitars versus organs..... is it because we are so afraid to step out of our comfort zone, step out of the boat.

God does not mind if we fail. Jesus did not mind failure – after all, in the world’s opinion, he was a failure.

What God hates is apathy – the status quo which may not be addressing the needs of those who are still far from Him.

Graham Nunn and Nancy (from Chine) have been with us for Hope 16,visiting schools and churches. Nancy was taken into Leamington a few days ago and she looked around her she noted that we have many churches and small congregations. In China, t!!they have large congregations and no churches

Love is the key.....Surely, if we try to love as Jesus loved, then, there is nothing to fear. If we love one another – friends and foes, then we are revealing Jesus in this world...and .. ***we will*** build up the Body of Christ,..... until all of us (everyone) come to *the unity of faith*”.