

We don't always show each other respect, or practice clear but tender honesty, or offer pro-active forgiveness. And certainly self-sacrifice for our fellow church members or those who have yet to find their way through the church door can be notable by its absence.

For Christians, charity begins at home. Not in any exclusive sense, and certainly not as an excuse to evade our mission of love to the wider world. Love begins at home in the church as the training ground, the resource base, and the support team for our wider outreach. What a powerful; yet awkward four letter word! The new commandment: In the church we are to love each other with nothing less than Christ's impartial love.

At all times lets remember that our Lord loves and treasures all other branches of the church just as much as our church is loved. And with a commitment to Inter-Faith relationships, I'm more convinced than ever that our Lord loves us and all people of faith and those of no faith totally equally.

Also, our Lord loves and cherishes those folk in our congregation who "**get up your nose**" just as much as you and those "**nice**" people who share your opinions. We are to love them all as Christ loves them.

At this point in this Communion Service, in a minute's silence, I invite you now to mentally select someone in this congregation towards whom you feel a degree of indifference or impatience or perhaps even hostility. Think about them. Picture them in your mind's eye. Ask God's blessing on them. Start the **new** commandment with them. Right now!

SILENCE

This is what I ask you to do: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other.

Amen!! Thanks be to God!!

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A Message from Mark! **That Four Letter Word**

2 May 2010 - Easter Five
Scripture: John 13: 31-35

This is what I ask you to do: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other.

Weddings are wonderfully happy occasions and I am privileged to conduct plenty. I've spoken of a wedding as perhaps the closest thing we have to experiencing a fairy tale. Two people who are deeply in love, commit themselves to one another for the whole of their life before God, family and friends. The atmosphere is charged with electricity; the joy in the air is palpable; it is a rich celebration of love. I hope, later this year, to have a special service for the reaffirmation of marriage vows for those of us who are still in love and would like that opportunity.

For Jesus, God's most beautiful and holy word is love. Love is central. It is the heart of true goodness. It is the one irremovable commandment. It is the essence of God's dealing with humanity. Intimacy is at the very crux of time and eternity.

Today, in spite of the wide-ranging abuse of the word love (which is often prostituted to describe a diverse range of lusts) a little of the old dignity of love remains. Even among faithless people, when they want to express a most noble and unselfish human passion, they still fall back on the word love. It still echoes with beauty and hope.

Jesus at the last supper challenged his disciples to allow love to be the key to their lives together; it was his new commandment:

This is what I ask you to do: Love one another, just as I have loved you, so you must love each other. Have you ever wondered why he called it the 'new' commandment? Already he had taught that the second most important commandment was "**to love your neighbour as yourself**". So what is new about this later statement?

Maybe it is new because it is a special command given to his followers, to the infant church. It is not spoken to the general population. Therefore, speaking to his close friends, he calls it a new commandment. It is a particular responsibility laid upon the people of faith. They, above all people, have a special responsibility in how they care for one another.

But there is a second way in which it is new: because this love is his own radical brand of love: ***love each other just as I have loved you.*** Lets unpack this a bit. It is almost impossible to define love abstractly. Dictionaries do not help much. Even scholarly analysis of the Greek word ***agape*** can only take you so far. The Greeks talked about such distinctions but were not particularly good at practicing them.

Love needs to be **practised**. Better still, it needs to be **embodied**. Only then do we recognise the real thing. Love in action makes all the difference. A loving person is the best definition. Jesus asked the members of the young church to love each other with his radical quality-love. The life of Jesus defines Christian love. What is its special quality? Lets look briefly at four facets of the radical love of our Lord and Saviour.

Respect The Jesus-love respects others. Respect takes seriously each other person, with their dignity and rights, their gifts and idiosyncrasies. Respect recognises the God-given unique and precious nature of the other person. It does not look down on another, nor talk down nor put down.

Honesty The second quality of Jesus' love is his honesty. In his book Caring Enough to Confront author, David Augsburger writes a most telling line: ***“Many church members are not loving enough to be honest with each other.”***

Jesus loved enough to be honest. He was never evasive. He could be annoyed with them about their lack of faith, or question their materialistic values. He was able to praise Nathaniel, rebuke Peter or James and John, and with keen understanding, deal with doubting Thomas. He did not smile sweetly and pretend that all was okay. He called the bluff of pretence and affirmed all that was good. When there were problems in the group, he did not look the other way and hope it might go away. His love was open and honest.

Forgiveness A third facet of his love was pro-active forgiveness. Not begrudging words after the perpetrator has apologised, but forgiveness which takes the initiative and reaches out to those who have offended.

Jesus did not brood on his injuries or nurse resentments or wait for apologies. He reached out and forgave those friends of his, those ordinary members of the embryonic church.

Sacrifice Now let me come to an unpopular facet of love: sacrifice. In our era, self-sacrifice is low on the ratings, yet Anzac Day commemorations are more popular than ever! I wonder if we don't bask in the reflected glory of the sacrifice of those who have gone before? Ours is a *“me first”* society; *“keep what I've got and grab all I can.”* Self gratification and to hell with everyone else.

There is no Jesus-type love which does not include self-sacrifice. Jesus gave his life for his friends: ***No person has a greater love than this: that they lay down their life for friends.*** It is not only the final sacrifice on the cross; throughout his ministry Jesus gave his life for others. His own comfort came a long last. In the early church, they knew how to sacrifice. They handed over their abilities, time and property for the common good of the whole Christian community. Possessions and money were seen as common-wealth. Surprised onlookers knew that these Jesus people were Christians by the quality of their love.

Respect, honesty, pro-active forgiveness, self-sacrifice. These are wonderfully instructive guidelines for our Elders, Church Councillors and each one of us. ***‘This is what I ask you to do: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other.’ John 13:35***

I remind you that this commandment is directed primarily at the church community. One sore failure of the later church that evolved from the early, vibrant, infant community, has surely been its failure to love one another with Christlike love. In fact many Christians who are good at loving their non-Christian neighbours, neglect their fellow Christians.

The disunity of the church, the endless fragmentation into more and more sects or denominations, shouts to the world that we do not love one another. Power and pride have often come before love.

Arguments about the Bible and Christian Doctrine have come before love. Fierce controversy about what constitutes responsible Christian morality takes precedence over love. Disagreements about style of worship: high church or low church, sacramental or evangelical, have been treated as more important than love.