

**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> May 2018**  
**Easter 6 (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**NT: Acts 10.44-48**

**NT: I John 5.1-6**

**G: John 15.9-17**

As you all know, this is a Christian community...so I'd like you all just to think for a brief moment about whether there has ever been anyone in your lives you have hated. I mean really hated. How can we quantify hatred? Well, perhaps you wish they didn't exist, or speculate, or even fantasize about really gruesome things happening to them. The uniformly Christian societies of the past did not blink at the idea of dungeons and torture chambers, and it has become the heritage entertainment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I remember a few years ago we went to Warwick Castle, and in their dungeon 'experience' (in which, as I recall, the first major torture is the extortionate entrance fee), when they said on the door that they don't recommend that children under 10 go in, and we said with great confidence that it would be fine for our 5 and 7 year olds. And when the other children and adults were screaming away as bodies were ripped open, and human entrails were being hurled out at us, Jerome was the one who was just laughing. It struck me then that it is not children who are the most fearful, but adults, with their developed empathy and imagination.

Well, I won't ask you what you would do to your worst enemies, to the people you hate most, but my guess is that actually none of you really hates anyone enough even to oil the cogs of the rack. Real hatred is so extreme that most of us never really get near it. But what I want to think about today is how we live with people we do not like. The Gospels are full of anecdotes and sayings which give us an indication of Jesus' teaching about love. Today's Gospel passage is one of the clearest: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." He goes on to say, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." And we could assume from this that Jesus is talking only to his disciples, and that the teaching is that we should love one another within the Christian community. But the teaching seems wider than that, because it is about loving our neighbours as ourselves. Who is our neighbour, Jesus is asked. Well, a man was going down from Jerusalem to

Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers... You don't need me to tell you the rest of the story of the Good Samaritan. The commandment we receive is to live in love and charity with all.

So often in Christian teaching I feel we are asked to love and care for those we have never met and do not know. The Good Samaritan himself poured out his love upon a stranger. Christian love cannot therefore be about the people we know, although it will include them. And so I think that Christian love must be able to embrace people we don't like as well as people we do, because it certainly includes people we can't like because we have never met them.

Listen to something from our first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles. This passage helps us to see love in the context of faith and salvation. Peter encounters Gentiles who have come to believe, and he says, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" What abounds in this question from Peter is his sense of justice and equality. All who believe must be treated the same, whether Jew or Gentile. And if Peter is showing love in his actions, then maybe this is the beginning of understanding Christian love, that it is about the equality of all.

Remember the words of Mary, that God will put down the mighty from their thrones, and will exalt the poor and the meek. Love is the leveller. Love is the thing we can give and receive in the same quantities as each other, regardless of anything else. And in what Peter says, we can see that he wants salvation for all. Let's relate this to the normal things we do in church life: charitable giving is part of what we do at St Nick's, as happens in every church. In the last couple of years we have had charitable projects, and we have corporately supported causes financially, and next month we shall have a speaker from Asylum Link give the address on a Sunday morning. We do these because we believe that all people deserve an equal chance of prosperity. Some of our corporate and individual attention is going to homelessness at the moment, because it is becoming an increasingly visible problem all around us. So although we shall often never meet the people who are benefiting from our act of love in giving, we are still showing love towards them. In loving them, we are showing them respect and regard as fellow citizens of the Kingdom.

And so when we return to the idea of love and hate, or at least love and dislike, it seems to me that liking or disliking someone is surprisingly irrelevant to our love for them. Christian love is about recognizing and valuing the worth of each individual: it does not have to be about liking each individual.

But what about hatred? Can we love and hate at the same time? Well, probably not, because hatred is about wishing to devalue the individual. If you do actually hate someone, then the damage being done is to yourself rather than to them, because you are inhibiting your own capacity for love. Jesus said, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.” Our own capacity for love must be limitless – in intention at least – because Jesus makes love the precondition of participation in eternal life with him. And the reason why I separate hatred from mere dislike – and I may not be using the best words for what I am trying to express – is because I want to restate the commandment to love in a way which does not make Christian teaching about passivity and victimhood. Jesus Christ was the innocent victim in his crucifixion, but he was not passive in the way he received the punishment. Instead he embraced it: “Not my will, but yours” he said to the Father. The commandment to love is not about telling us to roll over and take whatever the world throws at us, but the commandment is about standing up to the injustices and inequalities of the world. Sometimes this means not liking people. I don’t like everyone: I don’t like people who make others suffer, and I don’t like people who discriminate and exclude, and I don’t like the perpetrators of violence, and...well I could go on. But the great list of people I don’t like should not inhibit my ability to show them love. Love, as St Peter realised in our first reading, when he overlooked the difference between Jew and Gentile in the face of opposition within his Jewish-Christian community, love is knowing that everyone can be loved by God, and that he wants equality and justice for all, and he wants salvation for all.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Fr Crispin Pailing