

# Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020

*Acts 17.22-31; 1 Peter 3.13-22; John 14.15-21*

This week has seen the first steps in lifting the government's lockdown. It is being a complex balancing act. Life does need to start getting back to something more normal for all sorts of very good reasons: for the economy, for people's mental wellbeing, for children's education, and so on. But everything increases the risk of virus transmission, so everything has to be balanced against public good and public risk. And we human beings are not generally very good at assessing risk, let alone risks to the wider community in general.

The government's plan has shown up some odd comparisons, with questions raised like why someone can do one thing, but others can't visit their elderly parents or meet their grandchildren. The answer is that it is not just a matter of individual comparison, but of overall effect across the community and the population. And it is also about balancing priorities; everything increases the risk, so what are the most important things to allow, and what do we continue to forego so these other things can happen?

In our individualised culture we are really not used to thinking like this. In our scales of personal altruism, we can easily balance individual need and individual sacrifice, but it's more difficult for us to balance individual sacrifice with the general community need. Maybe the virus is reminding us of some really important lessons that we have tended to forget. The debate about primary schools reopening to more children is a good example of the complexity of the issues.

In so many ways we are being asked to show real love for others, and love is a complicated thing. It's a complex interaction between what we desire for ourselves and what we desire for another or others. It's about feelings, but it is also about decisions and choices. Love means that you decide to do things that don't always fit your feelings. The loving decision to remain faithful, is a prime example.

Jesus says in our Gospel reading for today, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." At first sight it doesn't sound very good, does it? It can sound controlling and manipulative and even abusive. It is not these things at all, because we know more generally that Jesus is just not like that. So what is he really saying?

Firstly, we need to put the idea of obligation out of our minds. This is not a kind of rule, but it is about a loving relationship. The commandments that Jesus means are those that Jesus has already spoken about in the previous chapter, including the commandment for the disciples of Jesus to love one another as he has loved them. Remember that he gives this commandment after washing his disciples' feet.

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So it is all about love; about learning to participate in the love of God. And the condition, the key for the disciples, is learning to love Jesus. “If you love me.” It’s not manipulation; it’s not emotional blackmail; it’s not a demand to prove love; rather it is the offer of a way forward. To unpack it a little, it means, “If you can learn to love me, then all these other things will indeed follow.”

Learning to love Jesus. It’s not a bad description of what it means to be Christian. Loving Jesus can take many forms, and it can take time. It’s not just about feelings, but about decisions, and choices, and vision, and challenge. It’s about what Jesus tells us about ourselves; that we are accepted, and forgiven, and loved, and needed. It’s about what Jesus teaches us about the purpose of our lives; the meaning of our lives, and the value of our lives. It’s about what Jesus reveals to us about God; his the loving character and loving purposes.

Just like any loving relationship, you have to give it time, and to make time for it. No loving relationship was ever sustained by indifference or selfishness. So in many ways the aim of all Christian spirituality is to spend time with Jesus; whether in prayer, or reading, or walking, or worshipping; or in serving others as he did; spending time in joyful times and in sad times; in times of strength and in times of weakness.

When Christians do this, when we are learning to love Jesus, then a very remarkable thing happens. It is the thing that our Gospel reading describes this morning. The Spirit of truth comes to us. The Spirit of the truth about who God is, comes to abide in us, both individually and together as a community. The Gospel of John is written by a person who knows this and lives this. He is part of a Christian community who knows this and lives this, and has understood profoundly this teaching of Jesus. That in the end, our love for Jesus, is as much a movement of the Spirit of God, as it is the desire of our own hearts.

Learning to love Jesus is about a journey into our relationship with God. Of course it has its ups and downs. Of course it has its times of joy and difficulty. And sometimes we may feel separated by some sort of lockdown. But the good news is that in the end it doesn’t just depend on us, for it is all about the love of God, and movement of his Holy Spirit.

CJ. 10.05.20