

**;Reflection for Sunday 22nd May 2022 by Rev Steve Painting
Acts 16:9-15 & John 14:23-29**

I sometimes think that when we look at short sections of the Bible, we lose something of the bigger picture. That I think, is particularly true of the accounts of Jesus teaching his disciples. The sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is a good example and this account of the last supper (John 13-16) along with Jesus' prayers that follow it (John 17) is another. If we read only part of this section, it is like walking out in the middle of a conversation, and so we lose the emphasis of what Jesus is trying to get across to his disciples. In the section of the conversation that we read today, John recalls Jesus saying, 'Anyone who loves me, will obey my teaching.' These words are central to the message that Jesus is trying to convey to the apostles but if we don't read on, we miss the repetition of this statement and hence the stress that Jesus places on it. It is a statement that in all, is made on five occasions in various guises during the course of the conversation.

If you love me, keep my commands John 14:15

Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me John 14:21

Anyone who loves me, will obey my teaching John 14:23

If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love' John 15:10

You are my friends if you do what I command John 15:14

The same point is made once in a negative sense, which again appears in today's reading. – 'Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching.' John 14:24

So, when this whole section of John's gospel is read in its entirety, Jesus emphasis becomes increasingly clear. Love for him is expressed by conforming to his teaching and commands. It is a principle that Jesus himself has modelled in his life, and his words in John 15:10 make that explicit. As he has been obedient to His Father's direction, so must His disciples be obedient to his direction. Jesus has already made this point earlier in the conversation, hinting also at the level to which His obedience would go. 'I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me' (John 14:30).

It is through the bond of love that obedience emerges. Jesus knew the depth of His Father's love and that the direction the Father gave was founded in love and love alone. Jesus could therefore trust that His Father's direction was sound, even when it involved the most difficult of choices. He could therefore also respond in love through obedience to the commands of His Father. It is the perfect relationship, and whilst the same level of relationship could never be fully achieved by Jesus' all too human apostles, their path in life was to head in that direction. It is the same for us too. We love Jesus because of his love for us, demonstrated most fully in his going to the cross, but also in the way he interacts with us in our lives. The only reasonable response in love for Jesus is to follow the

lead he gives us in his teaching and commands and there is a specific aspect of that of which we should note. Going back to the last supper conversation, the command that Jesus would expect to be uppermost in the minds of his apostles was the one he had just given them, 'a new command I give you, love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another' (John 13:34). To be sure though that they have got the message, Jesus (just as with the other statements we have looked at) uses repetition reinforce the point.

My command is this love each other as I have loved you John (15:12).

This is my command, love each other. John (15:17).

Jesus words in this conversation perhaps carry more weight in that they were the last ones he spoke with his apostles before his death. The message they convey is that love for Jesus is expressed in obedience to his commands and most significantly in his command to love one another. That message certainly had an impact on the writer of the gospel, John, who reproduces them here and gives us own take on them in chapter 4 of his first letter. He writes, 'Dear friends let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love' (1 John 4:7-8). To get the full picture of what John is saying it is worth reading on to the end of the chapter.

In a practical sense we see something of the outworking of obedience to Jesus in many of the stories in Acts. Today's reading from Acts is in some ways rather uneventful but the

willingness of Paul and his companions to respond to the direction of Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit is very evident. For some reason, and in a way that we are not told, the Holy Spirit had kept them from going into Asia and Bithynia and they found themselves travelling to the seaport of Troas. Here Paul is alert to the direction of the Spirit, in a vision of a man asking them to go to help the people of Macedonia. So, in faith and obedience, he and his companions embark upon the journey to Philippi. Their decision is not founded in self-interest, for their journey is potentially hazardous (Paul was shipwrecked on several other sea journeys) and they almost certainly would have anticipated something of the violence and opposition, to which they were subjected soon after their arrival in Philippi. Before we hear about that though, we can see that their motives were founded in love, both for Jesus and the people who they went to serve. Mixing with gentile women would have been frowned upon and staying in the house of a gentile woman, most definitely so, but disregarding their own reputations and in love and respect for Lydia, they respond to her request to stay with her.

Love is always challenging, whether it be for Jesus or for others. It always requires action and some degree of self-denial. Paradoxically though, the rewards of love are ultimately greater than those of self-interest. In love we find life and strength in our relationships, with both God and other people.