

A new commandment

[ACTS 11.1-18](#)
[Revelation 21.1-6](#)
[John 13.31-35](#)

'I give you a new commandment,' says the Lord, *'that you love one another. As I have loved you, you also should love one another.'* John 13.34

Jesus was very insistent that loving others is of utmost importance for anyone who would follow him. Loving others, or my 'neighbour' ranks only second to loving God with our whole being; heart, mind, will and soul. But how do we love people with whom we disagree? Or people whose lives are very different to ours? Do we even notice their needs? Who is deemed as worthy of our time and attention, our love?

Jesus' own ministry demonstrated what this love looked like. We recall his eating with those on the 'outer' the tax collectors, prostitutes and others who were deemed to be 'not worthy' by nice religious people. Love, as Jesus demonstrated it, was not just a thought bubble- a comfortable sentiment that everyone agrees with but which does little to bring to life in our own or other people's lives.

And his teaching emphasises that we cannot just say 'God is Love' and then go about living in ways which contradict this love. We've certainly seen this on the political campaign trail with insensitive comments about trans people as well as in the Anglican church's national or general synod which has run throughout this week and has debated the issue of the blessing of same sex unions.

For those of you with an interest in this particular topic, I can tell you that nothing has changed. The irony is that at a time when the vast majority of people do not seek out a Christian wedding, we do have same sex Christian couples who do want to have their legal unions blessed.

Difficulties arise when, instead of responding to people and their lived experiences, we see not the people but the issue. Instead of asking 'what is happening here?' or 'What would help this person live more fully as a follower of Jesus?' we brush off people's concerns because we have come to an opinion about 'the issue'.

This is true whether we are talking about migrants and refugees, the unemployed, people with non-binary sexualities, suffering from violence or who have disabilities. So instead of understanding people in all their complexity, we can fall too easily into black and white thinking. This person is 'in' and worthy of my attention but this person is 'out'.

Peter understood how the Gospel means that all people are acceptable to God and he responds to the criticism of the Jerusalem believers explaining his dream which enlarged his own beliefs. Three times a sheet full of animals all of which were prohibited as food by Jewish law was lowered and God said: "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." ⁸ But Peter replied, "By

no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” The Lord responds, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

The repetition of this occurrence three times indicates its enormous significance. The food laws are foundational to Jewish belief and here is the Lord changing them! And to emphasise that this dream was not just about food but about accepting all people into God’s kingdom, three gentile men come from Caesarea. In v¹² we realise that Peter is learning to be open to the Holy Spirit and to grasp this new thing that God is doing.

He says: *The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.* We hear how the Spirit had been actively calling these spiritual seekers and how Peter explains the Gospel to them and the Holy Spirit confirms their faith. As Peter explains: ¹⁷ *If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?*

We can apply this teaching to all kinds of situations. In this event God showed the early church that all people, regardless of their religious or ethnic background are called to follow Jesus and will be blessed by the Holy Spirit. So better questions to ask when people we might have thought of as ‘Not like us’ is ‘Are they searching for Truth?’ Or ‘Do they have faith?’ and ‘Has the Spirit confirmed their acceptance of Jesus?’ Our former Bishop, John McIntyre used to say, ‘Rather than assuming these people are wrong, ask yourself if you see the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.’

Jesus gives his new commandment of loving others just after washing the disciples’ feet. In John’s gospel a miracle or event generally is followed by some teaching and we see this pattern here. He washes their feet, and then tells the disciples that one of them will betray him. I am always amazed that Jesus was able to look Judas in the eye and wash his feet in a loving symbol of God’s acceptance of all people. I wonder what Judas felt- was he already feeling guilty that he had made plans to betray Jesus? None-the-less Judas leaves to carry out his plan and then Jesus continues with his teaching about love.

This long teaching passage goes from chapter 13- 17 and is called the ‘Farewell Discourse’ There are many other topics in it, but the theme of love runs all the way through. When we love one another, three things happen. Firstly, we allow others to see that we are Jesus disciples- people who put into practice what their teacher demonstrates. We show that the Jesus way of life makes sense, the love we show allows others to see the practicality of following Jesus themselves.

Secondly, Jesus links loving others with the gift of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 14 verse 15 he says, *‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.*

We need the Spirit to help us love others, especially when we are tired or our resources have been spent or when they are not easy to love. But Jesus also links us receiving the Spirit with our loving others.

Thirdly, when we love others, we continue to glorify Jesus who showed his love for us when he was lifted up on the cross and exalted on high. As our collect or prayer of the day today says: Jesus is glorified anew in the love we have for one another as disciples of the risen Lord Jesus.

In our gospel portion today, Jesus says, *'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.'*

What has he just done to be glorified? It was by carrying out acts of love; both the lowly act of washing the disciples' feet and Jesus' very radical inclusion of Judas in this - Judas who he knew would betray him. God's love extends to all and is not dependent on our worthiness. This is the love we are commanded to put into practice!

Our reading from Revelation 21 is of great comfort, especially for people who have experienced overwhelming loss and pain. John's vision of heaven points to God's presence being fully known and experienced as an ongoing reality:

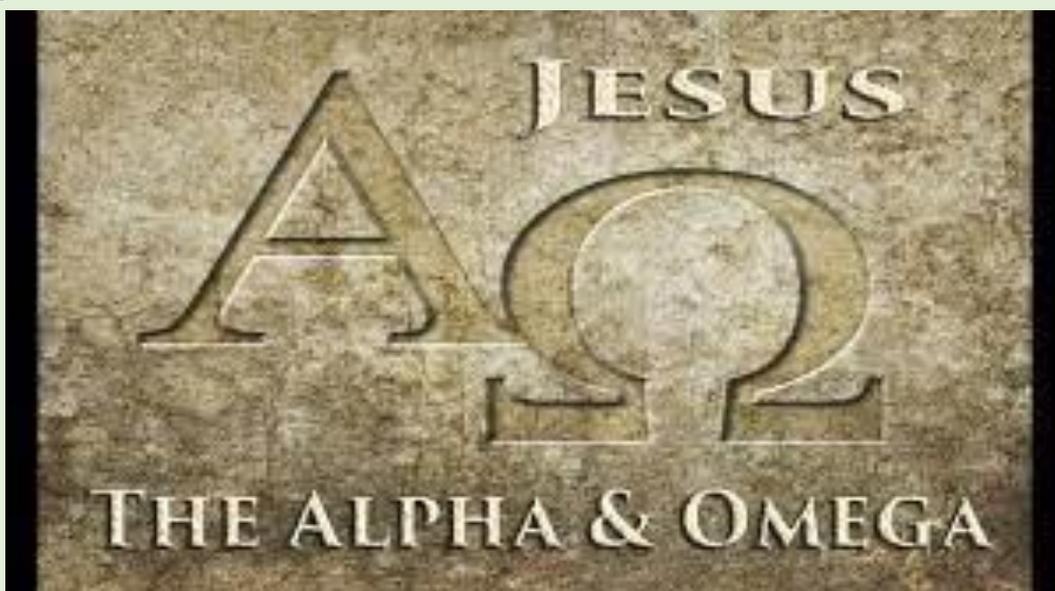
'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

God's compassion and love is evident as *God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.* The suffering of grief and loss will be replaced with comfort and new life as God makes all things new- an echo of the Psalm where the Spirit renews the face of the earth, but also an echo of resurrection - of Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, Tabitha, Jesus himself- now extended to all believers but to a new reality where we no longer experience the suffering that has accompanied us through this earthly life.



I particularly like the restoration of all things and people. Many years ago, when my then husband and I despaired of Miriam ever learning to walk, he had a God dream about her in heaven - running around in sunny paddocks, surrounded by wildflowers.

One day our ailments will be no more. Our grief at the loss of our loved ones will be swallowed up in the love we share. Jesus' work of restoration will be completed: he says in v6 *'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'*

I love how this promise of living water builds on the story of the Samaritan woman - an outsider who finds Jesus- and becomes a promise to each of us. Jesus offers us the refreshment of his love and his peace; we can find rest for our souls in him.

*Jesus, you are the Alpha and the Omega,
the beginning and the end.
Come and make your home with us.
You are the tender love that welcomes all people.
Nurture us your children, giving us life, teaching us to love.
Come and dwell among us, and make all things new.*