

Jesus' new commandment

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Easter 5C 2022 -Acts 11:1 – 18, Psalm 148, Rev 21:1 – 6, John 13:31-35 Sunday 15 May 2022

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34)

How do you deal with new things? I understand that there *are* people who are so keen on new things that they will adopt them uncritically, and champion them to everyone else. However, my experience is that many of us treat new things with a certain amount of suspicion – even hostility! Has the COVID pandemic made us more accepting of the new situations that have dogged our steps over these last two years? Or have the constant changes to regulations made us want to hang on even more religiously to our past practices than we used to?

It is interesting to hear this message about the new things, in the context of last week's meeting of the General Synod of our Church – was embracing the new the focal point of their discussions?

I must say I wondered about that phrase at the end of the reading from Acts 11 that we heard this morning. You remember “They were silenced: they praised God, saying, Then God has given to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” The General Synod decision on same-sex marriage was greeted by threats of division, rather than by accepting that this was the direction of the Holy Spirit! I wonder whether our Parish Council meeting this morning will find such ready and complete agreement to some account of the introduction of a new practice!

For what was being defended by Peter in the face of his

interrogation by the Jewish Christians was a complete novelty – for the first time the Christian message of Good News was being offered to people who were uncircumcised non-Jews – a Roman centurion to boot! Unheard of, because all of the apostles, and all of those who heard the word and were baptized on the Day of Pentecost were Jews – it had *always* been so! And here was Peter with his strange story of a sheet-full of all sorts of creepy-crawlies being let down from heaven and offered to him as good food. How could this possibly be? Perhaps Luke had forgotten, by the time he wrote this account, or had even chosen to ignore, the hesitations, the heart-searching, the denial that customarily go with making revolutionary decisions!

In both the Revelation reading and the Gospel, the word “new” lies at the heart of the message their writers are putting before us. Here were Christians under threat or actual experience of persecution. The writer of the Revelation, near the end of his words of encouragement to them, sees something radically new. The old order of heaven and earth has passed clean away, and the new Holy City has come down from God. Every tear wiped away, death and the accompanying mourning done away with. All the limitations that prevent us from enjoying the fulness of life are gone. Words of living hope are given here not only for these early Christians, but for those living in our part of the world, and in our time in history, “I will give water from the spring of eternal life”. This is a complete re-writing of our story – the old has passed away, and the new is adorned, radiant, like a bride.

Then there’s the Gospel reading. The commandment that Jesus gives his disciples is very familiar to us – “love one another”, and “this is how people will know you are my disciples.” All very well-known – but sometimes we skip over the “new” part of the story: “I give you a *new* commandment, that you love one another” – or the “just as” part: “*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*”. The love

that Jesus' followers are being urged to show to one another is "of the same nature" as that shown in the love that Jesus has for them. Recognizing that this is set in John in the context of the Last Supper, with all its emphasis on the coming death of Jesus, suggests that our love for one another is of a particularly sacrificial and all-embracing kind! Jesus loves us, and shows that love by dying for us – our love for one another is to be of the same quality!

And it is interesting that the "new commandment" is given to the twelve – just after Judas has gone out. Now it specifically does *not* say : "love all those that agree with you", but "love one another – as I have loved you"! It was interesting in the shadow of the General Synod debate that I was asked by a Year 12 student doing Religious Studies for her SACE, a number of questions regarding our Church's attitude(s) to same sex marriage. She wanted to know the biblical background, and whether our church had "adapted to the change" in state legislation regarding marriage. After outlining my own understanding, and that which I believe to be representing the range of views in this congregation, I also felt obliged to refer her to representatives of other traditions in the Anglican Church locally! I certainly saw that as an expression of the love for one another that is enjoined upon us!

But it is not only towards those we agree with, or even those we disagree with – this love for one another has an even wider application. In his presidential address to open the General Synod, our Archbishop, as Primate, asked the members of the Synod first to consider the widest scope of the context in which the Synod is meeting, and the need to be reconciled to those who "have something against us". He also asked his hearers to consider the widest possible application of the church's mission to follow Christ's "new commandment". He quoted from a book called "Imagining Mission with John V Taylor", which asks its readers "imagine that church is not the point of church, rather church exists to participate in

the healing of all things- the world, its people, the planet itself. Church is God's people participating in that liberation, a communion in mission. Church is Christ's body prolonging the logic of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in the world". The book also suggests "that mission is a longing to see all things renewed – our relationship with God and with one another, with our environment and species, with our societies, our world, and our cosmos. It is the healing and redemption of all things under the lordship of Christ".

For this "new commandment" that Jesus put before his followers, goes even beyond the newness embraced (finally) by the Church in Jerusalem in response to Peter's plea: it is to extend even beyond people of other religious traditions, or of none, beyond that of "our neighbours" or even "our enemies" – all of which is difficult enough! It extends to our love for the whole creation and the God who made it. It is this love that will enable "all things to become new", and that will have us enter the radical new life inaugurated by the resurrection, to have our fundamental thirst slaked by water from the spring of the water of life.