

## Sermon for 5<sup>th</sup> May 2024, Year B, Easter 6

### Preached at St John's Baillieston

#### John 15:9-18

#### Sermon

I was thinking of starting this sermon by leading you in a rendition of The Beatles' "All you need is love"... but then I thought better of it. Possibly my two-week holiday may have gone a little bit to my head. But my point is that when The Beatles released 'All you need is love' in the Summer of Love in 1967, they left it deliberately vague as to what that love might mean. Was it about indulging freely in selfish pleasures, or growing in compassion for one another? Was it a desperate search for spiritual awakening through drugs, or an honest attempt to reconnect with the divine? Or was it all these things?

The problem is that the word 'love' has so many different meanings in English. There's love between spouses and partners, between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, between friends and neighbours, between philanthropists and those in desperate need. Loving your neighbour is not exactly the same thing as loving your husband or wife. And I certainly love chocolate, but not in the same way I'd love my pet cat, if I had one.

It's all too easy to say 'love is the answer' without really having a clue exactly what that means. Even deeply wicked and selfish people think they know what love is, but I suspect they probably don't understand the word quite in the same way that Jesus is intending it in our Gospel reading today.

The Greek language in which the Gospels were written does have one big advantage over English when it comes to ideas about 'love', which is that they had several different words for different kinds of love. You've got *eros*, which is of course sexual desire; you've got *epithumia* which refers to a yearning or

craving for something; then there's *philia* – a platonic friendship or affection, and *storge*, which refers to the love of a parent for a child. But the type of love that Jesus refers to in this Gospel passage is *agape*, which we take to mean a self-sacrificial love that is passionately committed to the wellbeing of others. *Agape* is also the word used when the New Testament declares that 'God is Love', and Christians have therefore taken this kind of love to be the highest love known to humanity. If you're interested, C. S. Lewis wrote a book about these different kinds of love, called 'The Four Loves'.

The irony is that English, despite its influences from Greek, Latin and the Christian faith, doesn't even have a unique word for *agape* – the sacrificial type of love so closely associated with God. I've read that the ancient Indian language Sanskrit has 96 words for love, and Arabic has at least 11, but we're stuck with just the one that has to cover everything – no wonder it's so confusing! Unless you know the subtleties of that Greek word *agape*, you'd be forgiven for taking Jesus' command to love one another in perhaps the same way you'd hear Timothy Leary's insistence in the Summer of Love that we should 'Turn on, Tune in, Drop out'. Yeah, man, cool. Why don't we all just get along.

But Jesus is calling on us to do something far more radical than 'live and let live' or 'do no harm'. The love he's calling on us to embody is primarily interested in the good of other people, rather than of oneself, and it's a kind of love that puts even the charity of billionaire philanthropists into the shade. Philanthropists are rewarded with knighthoods and public applause, and tax rebates, and they're not often sacrificing much comfort as they decide who is worthy of their generosity. But the love that Jesus' life and teaching are focused on is something else entirely – a sacrificial love that offers everything for the sake of others, without reserve. Jesus of course demonstrates what this looks like throughout his short life, and especially on the Cross. But this wasn't a sacrifice that he performed so that we wouldn't have to – it was a demonstration of what followers of Jesus are all

called to be and do. 'Take up your cross and follow me,' he said, which was more literal than metaphor at the time.

Let's face it, nobody really wants to do this. 'All you need is love,' sounds so much more attractive than 'Take up your cross', and a call to lay down one's life for one's friends'. Even monks and nuns, who do in fact give up almost everything to serve one another in monasteries, still struggle to let go of petty resentments and desire for approval, comfort, and respect. Any love that wants to 'get something in return', is not the *agape* sort of love that is God's nature and our true calling as human beings.

So, what on earth are we to do about all this? If we're honest, we know how far we are from truly loving one another in the way that Jesus means it. In fact, I think it's impossible to even start if we haven't first experienced what it's like to be loved in that way, unconditionally, wholeheartedly. This is perhaps why Jesus puts his commandment this way: 'love one another as I have loved you'. Only those who have truly experienced being loved unconditionally, selflessly, can know what it means to offer that to others. This is partly why coming to church and praying are so important – they're both opportunities to experience being loved in that sacrificial superabundant *agape* sense by the God who made every tiny part of you, and then to practice sharing that love with everyone around us.

We invariably and inevitably become like those we spend our time with, so we try to spend as much time as possible with God in Jesus and with our brothers and sisters who are on the same journey. That's really the entirety of the Christian life – hang out with Jesus and let him rub off on you until you've forgotten what selfishness is, because you just can't imagine it anymore.

Sometimes I try to imagine a world in which selfishness doesn't exist and every human being's natural instinct is to care only for the needs of others. What would that even look like? Like heaven, perhaps – heaven on earth.

Selfishness is like an enormous barrier to this way of love. We can't love like Jesus because we're always more focussed on what we want to get or keep for ourselves. From our side, trying to love like Jesus feels like walking in concrete boots, through quicksand, in a snowstorm. Fortunately, the love that comes from God is never hindered in the same way. There's no selfishness on God's side, and nothing to stop us experiencing the fullness of God's love and grace, except, perhaps our own distractions, because we spend so much time staring at our concrete boots and wondering how we'll ever get them off, when in fact if we ever caught a momentary glimpse of God's glory we'd discover instantly that all the obstacles and barriers between us were only ever in our own minds, and of our own making.

'All you need is love'. Well, almost. 'All you need is God's unconditional love' is probably nearer the mark – but that's not nearly so easy to sing.