



BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 4:7-10; John 15:9-17

What I command you is to love one another

John 15:9 [Jesus said:] “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; *abide* in my love. 10 If you keep my *commandments*, you will *abide* in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s *commandments* and *abide* in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:12 “This is my *commandment*, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I *command* you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these *commands* so that you may love one another.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The centrality of love to human experience and well-being is captured well in the *Late Fragment* by Raymond Carver, a poem heard equally fittingly at weddings and funerals:

*And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.*

*And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.*

The last two words on line two have an understated power of evocation.

Our Gospel passage follows directly from the True Vine discourse. The metaphor is of the vine is abandoned, with one echo in v.16—*fruit, fruit that will last*. Instead, the writer expresses in the highly appropriate language of relationship the on-going love between the

Risen Lord and the disciple. Perhaps it needs to be emphasised again that here we are dealing with late first-century reflections, which focus on precisely that love which marks the relationships between Jesus and the disciples and between disciple and disciple. The meditation manages to speak of the deepest reality in the simplest of words.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

In one scene in the Gospel, Jesus gives the epitome of his teaching, which is open to all. The New Testament reflects this widely (see Paul below). The Johannine reception of this teaching is especially strong and rich.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbour as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question. (Mark 12:28-34)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The text has as proximate background the teaching of Jesus on love of God and neighbour (see above). Behind *that* teaching lies “You shall not take vengeance or

Thought for the day

There are odd expressions in the Fourth Gospel and in 1 John. It is strange to be *commanded* to love. Even stranger: “Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we *obey* his commandments.” What can “command” and “obedience” have to do with the love, the most free thing of all? It may help to recall that both human nature and divine nature are defined by love. We are being commanded to become what we most want to be in our deepest selves. Obedience here is the invitation to become our truest selves, true to our identity before God and our true to our mission simply as human beings.

Prayer

You know us more deeply than we know ourselves: may your love go before us always and inspire in us a generous love for our neighbour.

John 15:12-13 *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:18) The often noted Old Testament verse is not an isolated phenomenon. On the contrary, the characteristics of God are described thus:

“The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” (Exodus 34:6)

In the covenant, God *and the Israelite* both commit themselves to being merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

KIND OF WRITING

As we saw last week, this belongs to the

genre of Farewell Discourse. In the central section, the core teaching is offered (15:1-16:3).

III. THE BOOK OF GLORY

(13:1-20:31)

A. The Last Discourse (13:1-17:26)

- i. *Making God known*: the foot-washing and the morsel (13:1-38)
- ii. **Departure** (14:1-31)
- iii.  To abide, to love, and to be hated (15:1-16:3)
- iv. **Departure** (16:4-33)
- v. *Making God known*: Jesus' final prayer (17:1-26)

The reader will notice that the first paragraph is dominated by the word “abide”, meaning remaining in the Lord, practicing the love commandment. The second paragraph take up the theme of commandment, but, in a way, no longer as a commandment as from a master to a servant but an instruction to friends. The “up-grade” to friends is a fruit of Jesus’ self-sacrificing love.

ST PAUL

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 9 The little word “as” (*kathōs*) has a strong meaning in John’s Gospel. It is not simply a comparison but rather an indication of origin and continuity. It teaches that the love of the Father for the Son is continued in the love of the Son for those who believe in him. Because that is the case, we are commanded to inhabit that wonderful reality and remain in it.

Verse 10 This might look like a kind of “deal”, a quid pro quo. In reality, the commandment is to love, and in that loving, we abide in his love. Again the parallel between the Son and the Father is not just a formal comparison, but rather an offer of actual participation in the love of Father and Son.

Verse 11 For the New Testament reading, this echoes the start of 1 John. We touch here the core symbolic universe of the Johannine community.

Verse 12 From here on, we reflect rather more on the command aspect. Notice the little word “as” again. This means that the impossible command to love as Jesus loved is actually possible if we ground ourselves in his love first.

Verse 13 This is really a comment on the last four words of the previous verse. For believers, this has already happened and renders possible our love in return.

Verse 14 The illusion of command is suspended here: we are friends precisely because we have been so loved.

Verse 15 The ironies are many here: although we are *not* servants, we are commanded to do what *cannot* be commanded except by love.

Verse 16 V.16 stitches the command to love into the foundational call as disciples, expressed here as “choosing.” The metaphor of the vine is given a last echo but in a context which makes both belonging to the vine and bearing fruit really clear—it is all to do with that extraordinary relationship with the risen Lord. The “blank cheque” at the end was taken up in St Augustine’s famous phrase “love and do what you will.” Because you love, you will always choose what is good. Likewise, because you are loved and do love, what you will ask for will be consistently loving.

Verse 17 A summary appeal, which makes a frame with v.12 and brings this part of the mediation to a close.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. A commandment of love is something of a contradiction in terms. Love is a free choice. That is what gives the thrill to the experience of being loved. Recall times when you received gestures of love from another—a spontaneous embrace from a husband or wife; a wave from a friend; words of comfort and affirmation—not because the other person felt obliged to reach out to you but because they wanted to let you know that you were loved. What effect did that have on you? Did it bring you joy? Perhaps you have had a glimpse of the truth of what Jesus said, that it is in loving that our joy is complete.

2. Often love and friendship make demands on us. Parents give freely of their times and energy to the care of their children but sometimes it requires a lot of effort. Also in responding to the needs of friends or spouses we can be challenged to ‘lay down’ our own ‘lives’ at least for a time. Can you recall when a

time when putting yourself out for others bore fruit for them and for you?

3. “I chose you”. Have you had the experience of being ‘chosen’ by someone? What was it like for you to be chosen? What is it like for you to consider yourself as one chosen by Jesus?

4. Jesus called the disciples ‘friends’ not ‘servants’ because he had told them everything about himself. When have you allowed yourself to be known and loved? When has friendship blossomed for you because you made the time available and took the effort to understand another?

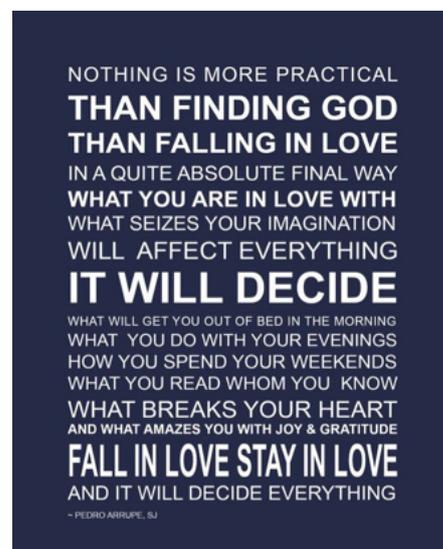
5. The presence of God is revealed to us in the love we experience from others. Sometimes it can be clearly seen in the love between husband and wife, or parent and child when it doesn’t have to be proved but is the nature of the relationship in which they live. Love can also be apparent in difficult situations like when someone is ill or dying or in any kind of trouble. Abiding in the love of another is one of the greatest joys of life. When have you had that experience?

PRAYER

God of all nations, in the gift of your Son you have embraced the world with a love that takes away our sin and bestows perfect joy.

Grant to all who have been reborn in baptism fidelity in serving you and generosity in loving one another.

Grant this through Jesus Christ, the first-born from the dead, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit God for ever and ever. Amen.



Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God

John 4:7 Beloved, let us *love* one another, because *love* is from *God*; everyone who *loves* is born of *God* and knows *God*. 8 Whoever does not love does not know *God*, for *God* is *love*. 9 *God's love* was revealed among us in this way: *God* sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is *love*, not that we *loved God* but that he *loved* us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The great questions remain the same: Is there a God? What may I hope? What should I do? 1 John is clear on the identity of God and on Christian hope. It is also, in various ways, clear on discipleship and Christian living. Our passages builds on the established understanding of God and the Son of God and goes on to detail appropriate behaviour. In itself, the sequence of these ideas is interesting. In Catholicism, great emphasis has often been placed on moral behaviour as it that somehow was *the* meaning of the Gospel. 1 John puts us right: faith is first and then morality. In the words of Eugene M. Boring, “God’s love is prior to ours and, in fact, makes our possible.”

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

There is a considerable emphasis in this Letter on sin, as may be seen in the related passages below. The emphasis on love is not just a spiritual insight; it points to a lack of love in practice. The related passages below constitute in some way the substance of the commentary.

KIND OF WRITING

Prologue: The Word of Life (1:1-4)

I. God is light (1:5-2:27)

II. God is righteous 2:18-4:6)

III. God is love (4:7-5:12)

Epilogue: Assurances (5:13-21)

There are several subsection in III above:

A. Love of God / Faith (4:7-21)

B. Faith in God’s Son / Love (5:1-12)

RELATED PASSAGES

Sin in 1 John

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful

and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1John 1:8–10)

No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. (1John 3:6–9)

We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them. (1John 5:18)

God and Love in 1 John

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. (1John 3:1)

The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters. (1John 3:10)

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1John 4:16)

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. (1John 5:1–2)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 7 Beloved is the fitting address here given the subject matter. Even our love begins in God and flows from God’s love. Those born into the new life in Christ also *know God*.

Verse 8 *The* definition of God in 1 John. Cf. 4:16 above. The word for love here is *agapē*. This is not a rare word in Greek and the range of meanings is quite wide. However, in the New Testa-

ment it is used in a special way for the highest Christian virtue. It really means love of the other, seeking the other’s well-being without considering the benefit or counting the cost to oneself.

Verse 9 This teaching is emphasised as much in the Gospel as in this letter. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* (John 3:16–17) *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.* (John 20:30–31)

Verse 10 The theological priority of God’s love is clear. Of course, in experience, it is often some new experience of human love which opens us up to God. As for “atoning sacrifice”, the note in Easter 3B15 may help.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It may help to recall my own experience of being loved. Who are the people who have helped me feel “beloved on this earth”?
2. The love of God is a great theological theme. However, unless we come to know this love in our own hearts and lives, it remains “out there” somewhere. When did I come to know the love of God personally? Was there anything which promoted or triggered this liberation realisation?
3. The link between the love of God and love of others is unbreakable across the Gospels, Paul and 1 John. It is not always was to love just as we have been loved...and yet, it is the heart of the matter. Only then can we speak of *metanoia*.
4. “The good news is that God love you. The ‘bad news’ is that God loves everyone else just as much.” Attributed to Peter McVerry SJ.

PRAYER

God, mysterious lover, help us to know your astonishing love for us in the daily reality of our lives. As we have been loved, help us to love others with the very same love with which you have loved us, through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

God shows no partiality: but anyone who does what is right is acceptable to him

Acts 10:25 On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. 26 But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal."

34 Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 So he ordered them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In order to grasp the force of the excerpt, all of Acts 10 should be read (privately!) by the reader and the preacher. At the top of the chapter, Cornelius is carefully introduced (Acts 10:1-8). Then follows the famous tale of Peter's dream (Acts 10:9-16), in which God shows him that no food is unclean. The link between these two scenes in then made (Acts 10:17-24), leading to the excerpt appointed for today.

The issue at stake is not infrequent in the New Testament: how much of the Old Testament Law should be retained, especially in regard to the great identity markers of Judaism, that is, circumcision, Sabbath observance and, in a special way, the dietary laws? This topic, in different guises, is found in Mark 7 (and |s), the Sermon on the Mount, Romans, Galatians and Acts. Given this intense discussion, it may be safely concluded that Jesus (*pace* Mark 7) left no clear teaching. This makes sense because, although he does break the purity laws and the dietary regulations, Jesus encounters very few Gentiles in his ministry (and some of those stories are not strictly historical). The debate raged and was highly significant. Insistence on the

full range of identity markers would have adversely modified the appeal of the Good News.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Inclusivity—a constant challenge—is an issue in the community.

KIND OF WRITING

A teaching narrative.

RELATED PASSAGES

In Luke's symbolic expansion of the preaching in Nazareth, it is precisely the issue of Gentiles that provokes the negative reaction: *But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.* When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. (Luke 4:25–29)

That openness to all the nations was already prefigured in the prayer of Simeon and in genealogy going back to Adam (3:23-38)

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2:29–32)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 25 As the omitted verses make clear, it is a stretch for Peter to enter the house of a Gentile. Cornelius is technically a god-fearer, attracted to Judaism but not a proselyte. Caesarea was the centre of Roman administration.

Verse 26 Peter and Paul are at one on this (!): Acts 14:11-15. Peter does not dispense salvation, he proclaims it.

Verse 34 The teaching of vv. 34-35 is found widely: Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6; col 3:25; Eph 6:8; 1 Pet 1:17; James 2:1. It is a reception and widening of Jesus' own practice. Cf. Dt 10:17; Ps 81:2; Lev 19:15, 2 Chron 19:7.

Verse 44 Technically, this is an interruption, a common literary ploy (cf. 2:37; 17:32; 22:22; 23:7; 26:24). The device underscores the suddenness and unpredictability of divine intervention. It also serves to confirm what Peter has just been saying. It is a reprise of Pentecost in miniature.

Verse 45 Jewish Christians, accompanying Peter, are surprised. This in itself may cause surprise but there is an early Jewish text which says that prophecy is withheld from the gentiles (Targum on Ex 33:16).

Verse 46 The full list of gifts includes tongues, praise, preaching and prophecy.

Verse 47 A rhetorical question, expecting the answer "no one". The nice implication is that the church must follow the Spirit, not the other way around. "Just as we have" = just as converted Jews have.

Verse 48 Cf. When she and her household were baptised, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:15)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The universality of Peter's vision in vv. 34-35 can still astonish and, even more, be demanding to put into practice. On my own journey, when did the same insight dawn on me and what were the consequences?

2. Not for the last time, the Holy Spirit is ahead of the church. In our own lives, it is only on looking back that we can see just how much the Spirit was active and "ahead." Can I name some personal instances?

3. Peter's question resembles one often heard today: what would Jesus do? It arises when a tension is felt between law and Gospel, between regulation and what seems to be right. Bringing such dilemmas into prayer is the only way forward.

PRAYER

Spirit of the living God, breathe on us again your breath of life that we, disciples of today, may know your life-giving surprises.

Pour out on us once more the vigour and excitement of Pentecost, so that we may bring the Good News to life in our time. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful.

THE LITURGY

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 4:7-10; John 15:9-17

READINGS 2 AND 3

There is a great overlap, obvious to all, between the second and third readings. The words and the vocabulary are practically identical.

It helps to illustrate that much on the lips of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is really the core teaching of Johannine community. Even the laying down of one's life is found in both, albeit with a different wording.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 98 is very well chosen because praises God for offering salvation to "the nations" with the result that "all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God." The appointed response makes that even more clear.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48 The Holy Spirit comes to the Gentiles

If you listen carefully, you might feel this story is told backwards: the Holy Spirit comes on the household of Cornelius and then they are baptised. Not for the last time, the Holy Spirit is ahead of the church!

Second reading

1 John 4:7-10

This is a great reading and in it we hear that everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Everyone. The reason is easy: God is love and whenever we experience love, we touch something of the divine.

Gospel

John 15:9-17 The command to love.

Try to listen out for repetition of the word "love" in this reading. In the vision of John's Gospel, there really is only one commandment, to love.

That is, we are commanded to do what cannot be commanded but must come freely from inside. St Augustine summarised it all in the apparently liberal but actually very demanding, "love and do what you will"!

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 11 May

Acts 16:11-15

The delightful story of Lydia is very instructive: she not only listened, *she opened her heart.*

Tuesday 12 May

Acts 16:22-34 Arrest and miraculous escape

The reason for the arrest would have been in yesterday's reading (replaced by the election of Matthias): Paul cured a woman with a spirit of divination and her owners were angry at being deprived of a source of income. Today's today then goes on to say what happened to Paul and Silas in prison. The big question is asked by the gaoler: "What must I do to be saved?" The answer of Paul and Silas is as fresh today as it was then.

Wednesday 13 May

Acts 17:15, 22-18:1 Paul talks to philosophers at Athens

The Areopagus is a spot in ancient Athens, from which you get a great view of the temples, especially the Parthenon. The honouring of gods in such "houses" is the topic of the speech. This short presentation contains some very powerful expressions ("in him we live, and move, and exist"). The reaction at the end is very interesting – some laughed, other were intrigued and a few become believers.

Thursday 14 May St Matthias

Acts 1:15-17, 20-26 The election of Matthias to replace Judas

Judas, by his betrayal, had created an empty space among the twelve apostles. In the presentation of two candidates, we find an interesting description of what an apostle was supposed to be: someone who had seen all that Jesus had done.

Friday 15 May St Carthage

Acts 18:9-18 Paul is brought before the proconsul (the governor) of Achaia

If you visit ancient Corinth, you can still see today the tribunal, known as the *bema*. This was the spot where the governor refused to get involved in an essen-

tially religious dispute. Corinth was to become an important part of Paul's ministry, as the two surviving letters to the Corinthians attest.

Saturday 16 May St Brendan

Acts 18:23-28 Apollos from Alexandria

Alexandria in Egypt was a great centre of Jewish studies. Today we meet a very gifted man from that city who already believed in Jesus but had not entered fully into the faith. Later in Corinth, his eloquence (in contrast to Paul's poor speaking ability) led some people to rank him above Paul, causing division in the community and distress to Paul, their only father.

REFLECTIONS

We can thus understand how *agape* also became a term for the Eucharist: there God's own *agape* comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us. Only by keeping in mind this Christological and sacramental basis can we correctly understand Jesus' teaching on love.

The transition which he makes from the Law and the Prophets to the twofold commandment of love of God and of neighbour, and his grounding the whole life of faith on this central precept, is not simply a matter of morality—something that could exist apart from and alongside faith in Christ and its sacramental re-actualisation. Faith, worship and ethos are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God's *agape*.

Here the usual contraposition between worship and ethics simply falls apart. "Worship" itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented.

Conversely, as we shall have to consider in greater detail below, the "commandment" of love is only possible because it is more than a requirement. Love can be "commanded" because it has first been given.

Benedict XVI, *God is love* §14