Questions on ‘Sharing God’s love’ (1) - within the church family

**Getting started**

1. Would you say that St Margaret’s is a *loving* church?

2. Can you give a few examples of any love *you* have experienced over the years?

3. In what ways have you tried to *show love* to other people in the church family?

**Into the text**

*(Today we are going to concentrate on 2 verses from a section of John’s gospel, in which Jesus speaks shortly before his death (John 13:31-38). Please read them now…)*

4. *How* does Jesus want his disciples - after his departure from the earth- to treat each other? How is this *different* from the way we might view other people who are also important to us?

5. Given the duty to love one another is at least 1200 years old (Leviticus 19:18) , how can Jesus call this a ‘*new’* command?

6. What is the *model* we should set before us in the way we behave towards our fellow Christians? (John 13:34).

7. What does such behaviour show us *to be*? (John 13v35)?

**Love in practice**

*(John – who heard Jesus’ words and wrote this gospel- was obviously deeply struck by this new command. It recurs throughout his letters. Have a look at one example, 1 John 3vv16-20..)*

8. What attitude does John want to *prevent* in Christians through these words

9. Can *you* sometimes be tempted not to ‘earth’ your love in actions?

10. How can the model of Jesus (v16) sharpen our understanding of ‘*true love’*?

**Thinking it through**

(Let’s rejoice in the love that is evident in our church family, and in our own hearts and lives. But also let’s not be smug and unaware of the times when we have been selfish and lacked pity. ‘*The new command is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice.’ Professor Don Carson.)*

11. Does hearing Jesus call make you feel pleased (‘*At least I’m trying to do that!*’) or despondent *(‘Far too often I fail to be that loving!’)*

12. Are there are things *you* could do to express your love for you Christian brothers and sisters more than at present? Are there things you think we could do *as a Church* to show that love more?

*Don’t forget that this side of Heaven, we are all ‘works in progress’ in this matter of love, but we have received the new heart and new spirit promised through Ezekiel (36v26) to help us and lead us forward, even as we wait to see God face to face (1 Corinthians 13:8-13)*

*Do finish by praying for one another, for our Church family, that we might increasingly love one another as Christ loved us, and this may intrigue and attract a largely unloving, selfish, lonely world…*

All age slot

Last month I went to our mother and toddler group – Cameo’s- Christmas party and had a lovely time

At one point, I noticed one little boy snatching from another one of these [Image of a toy fire engine], and that led to a few tears. From the kid who’d lost his favourite toy, and from the one who was told to give it back.

**‘Share your toys!’** is a lesson young children have to learn, and it’s not an easy one…

It’s a lesson ALL of us need to learn, grown ups too!

I was lucky enough to be given quite a few of these [Image of big box of chocolates] over Christmas, and it would have been very selfish and greedy of me to guzzle them all myself! I needed to share them, (image of someone offering the box to others) and have largely done so apart from the strawberry ones!!

This month, we are going to be thinking about sharing something with others.

**Not** toys or choccies, but something far more wonderful.

We’re going to be thinking about ‘**Sharing God’s love’**

The great news at the centre of our faith, one that shines brightly at Christmas, is that God (image of a Crown] is NOT only full of power and wisdom. He is also full of love (image of a heart) . A love for us that is SO strong that he sent his son Jesus down from Heaven to show us what God is really like, to **rescue** us from the terrible mess we often make in our lives, to bring us into God’s family, and one day take us to our forever home, with him in Heaven.

What an amazing loving God we have, and we’re not to keep that love tightly to ourselves.

Rather, we’re to **share** it with others..

Today we’re going to think about what sharing God’s love might mean for us, in the way we behave towards other people in the Church family, and this is what Jesus told his disciples to do. They are- we are – to ‘Love one another’

That’s not too hard to remember – children and grown ups can all remember just 3 words. Let’s say them together (**Do it!)**

But what sort of love is Jesus calling us to?

Listen in to him again:- ‘As I have loved you, so you must love one another’

Do any of you remember this book being read to you when you were younger? [Image of book ‘Guess how much I love you’]

It was a great favourite in our house , and it always finished with ‘ I love you So so so so so so much’ and then a kiss!’

Well Jesus wants us to remember how much he loved us, and then to love others in the Church in the same way , putting them before ourselves, even though that’s hard to do, because we want the very best for them.

Well in a few minutes time all of us – the boys and girls in the Hall, and the adults in church, are going to think what this might mean for us , but for now, let’s look again at Jesus’ words

‘As I have loved you, so you must love one another’

If we can, **let’s say that together**, and then I’ll pray for us all, that we might live and love like this.

[Prayer]

**Sermon**

Towards the end of last year, our Church Council considered various new ‘straplines’ for our Church- words that describe what we are trying to do- and we were attracted by the phrase ‘Sharing God’s love’. It is brief, memorable and – we believe – an accurate statement of what we are trying , by God’s grace, to do. You may already have seen it popping up on our screens and our publicity….

But what we didn’t want to do is simply to leave this phrase as simply a piece of jargon used by Church staff and leaders of various initiatives. We want it to be considered, and – we pray- embraced – by **each** member of our church community. So that if we’re asked what our Church is about, we don’t need to scratch our heads and then mumble an answer. We can say confidently and truthfully that we are committed to ‘Sharing God’s love’ both i**nside** the Church, to one another, and **outside** the Church walls, we want to share that same love to others.

Today, we are going to think about what ‘Sharing God’s love’ means for us in the way we are to relate to one another in our church community. To help us , we are going to focus on just 2 verses from our reading from Ch 13 of John’s gospel, so do get those verses in front of you if you can - p1094 of Church Bibles, or on your phones.

I’d like us to notice first (1) **A new command** that Jesus gave his followers . We are to **‘Love one another’.**

It’s striking language...

We are not simply to ‘like’ them, as we might do a colleague, a next door neighbour, a member of a club we belong to..

Rather, the language suggests the sort of relationship we’d hope to see in families – between brothers and sisters, kids and parents and grandparents.

We’re not to be content with having superficial friendships with one another, a casual nod and handshake as we rush off from Church to do other things and see other people. Rather we are ‘**to love one another deeply from the heart’** , as the apostle Peter put it.

This is the new command Jesus impresses upon his disciples..

But some of you might be wondering why this is called a ‘New’ Command, since the duty for Jews to love their neighbour as themselves was contained in the law of Moses (Leviticus 19:18) given well over 1000 years earlier.

Why does Jesus call this law a ‘new’ one them?

Well, there’s a very good reason, and it’s because Jesus is giving them a totally new standard [ (2) **A new standard]** of love. No longer are they simply to try to love people as themselves. From now on, they are to be inspired by an **even higher** standard, a **better** model, the one given by **Jesus** himself.

To see this, it’s helpful to remember when Jesus gave this teaching….

It was on the final night of his life here on earth, and he’d just gathered his disciples together to eat the special Passover meal. (Image of Jesus at table) At this meal, Jesus did something out of the ordinary- he went round each of the disciples washing their feet. This gesture stuck in the claw of some of his disciples, who felt that such an act was really inappropriate for their Master.

Washing their feet – that was the sort of thing a slave should do for them, not Jesus!

It’s as eye-watering as King Charles visiting a care home and doing the personal care for the residents😊

And yet, Jesus is insistent that he WILL do this for his disciples, because it points forward to what he will shortly do for them, dying in their place so that they might be washed clean from all their sins.

After this meal, Judas left to betray Jesus, and within about 15 hours Jesus would have been crucified

Jesus wants his disciples to see this forthcoming death **not** as a miserable defeat, the end of all their dreams, but rather as the moment when his glory shines the brightest, as God’s wisdom and power and love are displayed in full measure

With that in mind, look and listen to what Jesus says to them

‘As I have loved you, so you must love one another.’

After Jesus’ departure from them, and before his return in glory, he wants his disciples to love each other, not faintly, not at 50% capacity, not even as they’d want to be loved themselves, but **to the uttermost**, guided by the example of Jesus, who was willing to give up even his life to bring blessing to people.

To love like that is no mean feat, especially when our Christian brothers and sisters **can** be difficult, irritating and demanding

~ Did the disciples ‘get’ what Jesus was saying to them?

Well Peter did. So too did John, the author of this gospel. Look at what he said in one of his letters, recorded in the Bible:-

16This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

17If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them,

how can the love of God be in that person?

18Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Loving each other is **not** simply waving at a fellow Christian in the supermarket aisle!

It is being willing to **lay down** our lives for them, loving them with actions and in truth

**What** might this involve in practice?

Well, I did something this week I’m not sure I’ve ever done before in preparing for a sermon!

I emailed about 30 people from across the church family asking them for their views on whether we are a loving Church, and what they most appreciated as practical expressions of love from others

There was a high degree of agreement that ours is a very loving Church, which was great to hear.

There was also quite a lot of consensus about what ‘love in action’ looks like

It certainly includes the **words** we speak (image of woman speaking)- including the words we speak at Church of course, but also the words we speak as we visit people, speak to them over the phone or zoom, and the kind words written in emails and cards and notes we send. Words can indicate our interest, our concern, our love for others…

Also it includes the **practical things** we do to help out others – like cooking meals for those who are in some form of need (person at cooker) or taking people to medical appointments or helping people who are anxious because their accounts have been hacked or providing a financial gift for people who need a helping hand. If the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ don’t make us pity them, and want to help out practically, if we can, John’s question is a fair one ‘*How can the love of God be in that person?’*

A very important way in which we can show God’s love for others is by helping them **grow in faith**, pointing them (person pointing upwards) upwards to the grace that is in Jesus, Immanuel, God with us in each and every season of our lives. It’s wonderful when I hear of people who are taking opportunities to encourage others in their faith- perhaps over a cup of coffee or meal, sometimes in a structured way like meeting regularly for bible study and prayer. Surely one of the most loving things we can do for people is helping them look back to all that Jesus did for them on the Cross, looking up to the grace that is daily available to us, and forward to the certain hope of Heaven that we have because of Jesus….

One thing that all of these things have in common is that they tend to be **costly** – at the very least in terms of our time (image of a Clock). Loving people as Jesus did – doing all that is within our power to bring them blessing- can be exhausting since people’s needs don’t always come to us when we have loads of time, and some people’s needs are pretty constant. Might that be why Paul encourages Christians not to become weary in doing good? When we feel our limbs flagging, let’s fix our eyes on Jesus, whose self-giving led him to be willing to go to a cross for our sakes…

~ Please don’t feel that what I’ve mentioned here is a full list of what sacrificial love might look like for you. The opportunities to love are limitless, and as we fix our eyes on the standard of Jesus seen in Jesus, we can be inspired to give and not to count the cost. To give as Christ gave..

A new command about love, a new standard of that love. The final thing that Jesus brings to our attention is that love for our fellow Christians is **A new badge** by which we will be recognised…

I’m sure that you have realised that lots of people have badges that identify them as part of a community

* School children often have a badge (school blazer) that shows which school they attend;
* Footballers have badges (BHA emblem) that help us know which team they are playing for;
* Professionals have uniforms with badges (Policeman) so we can respect their authority.

Well , what can we say about someone who displays a **Christ-like love** (word **‘Love’** inside a diamond) for Christians?

Listen to what Jesus says:- 35By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

**If** we love other believers, that’s one of the badges that marks us out as genuine Christians, and that sort of love can often be very attractive to people from the world looking in at us, since it’s so **different** from the selfishness and greed and loneliness that we see in so much of the world today….

Jewellery like crosses and fishes, stickers we put on our cars, T shirts and caps with Christian slogans can all have their place, but none – I would suggest - are as effective as love, for the love that we have for our fellow believers is a reflection – albeit an imperfect one – of the love that God has for the Son and the Son has for the Father.

You and I can – and should be – **living adverts** for the Lord Jesus, and one key way is the degree to which we love our brothers and sisters in the Church….

~ I wonder how that makes you **feel**?

~ For many I hope it will excite and inspire you to love your fellow Christians here in Church **even more** than in 2023. One person told me how she wants to do one thing each week to express her love for a different Church member. What a wonderful new year’s resolution to make!

~ Another told me that her experience is that when she does something to encourage another, she feels a real sense of blessing herself, and that shouldn’t surprise us since Jesus said it’s more blessed to give than receive….

But there will be some here, I’m sure, whose hearts are slightly sinking at the scale of this role….

To love fellow believers constantly, thoughtfully and sacrificially…

That’s a task more demanding than any Lord Sugar will set for his potential business partners 😊

Perhaps we feel our knees knocking a bit, especially when we realise our own weakness and capacity to get things wrong?!

Well listen to one last encouragement to receive from John’s gospel. It’s this. There is (4) **A new power** that we Christians receive from God to help uslive and love..

This power was described by one of God’s spokesmen in OT times like this:-

**‘I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you’**

The wonder of being a Christian is that we are not just forgiven our sins, reconciled to God, and promised a glorious future with God in Heaven.

But also, here in the present, God gives us a new heart – one that now wants to go God’s way- and a new spirit – indeed the very Spirit of God – to help us live this way.

So , let’s not be downhearted at this new responsibility to love as Christ loved, or daunted by the role to be living adverts and pointers to God , let’s rejoice that we do this not in our own strength, but through the resources that God has kindly given to us…

A moment for quiet personal reflection as we think about the new command to love our fellow believers before I lead us in a prayer

[Prayer]