

## A NEW COMMANDMENT

Exodus 12. 1-14, 11-14

1 Corinthians 11. 23-26

John 13. 1-17, 31b-35

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Tonight, I invite you to look closely with me at a scene which is both unusual and surprising. It is a scene in which some of the expected details have been changed and where the roles of the actors have been reversed. In a way, it's a scene in which all has gone topsy-turvy.

The scene I'm talking about, of course, is the one that we have read about in John 13. We find our Lord and his disciples in the midst of their Passover celebration. They are not celebrating Passover at home, but rather in a room that has been lent to them. And since they are not at home, they do not have their servants with them. In Jesus' time and in Jewish culture, when a host received guests at his home, his slaves were there to help him; and one of the slaves – preferably a non-Jew – was given the task of helping the guests freshen up before the meal. This included washing the guests' feet before dinner. In a country where people came from long distances and had to travel on sandy or muddy roads wearing sandals, such a service was welcome indeed. To offer foot-washing was a normal and expected part of Middle Eastern hospitality.

Given the absence of servants on this Passover evening, we might have expected that one of Christ's disciples would have volunteered to wash the feet of those present. But no! Our text in John 13 tells us that our Lord 'got up

from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him' (13. 4 – 5). The fact that Jesus did this during the meal, and not before it, shows us that he intended to make a point. As he said to his disciples, 'I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.'

Later on in that same chapter of John, Christ presses his point further when he says, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another' (13. 34).

The circumstances that surround this fundamental teaching about love are often glossed over by readers of St John's gospel. At first glance, many readers think that our Lord's commandment about love is given in the wake of his washing the disciples' feet, and in one sense, this is true.

But in actual fact, Jesus gives the disciples the commandment about love only after having made another very symbolic gesture; he gives the commandment only after he has dipped a piece of bread in a dish and given it to Judas Iscariot. In the Middle Eastern culture, to personally dip a piece of bread in a dish before offering it to one's guest was a sign of honour; and Christ makes this honourable gesture to the one disciple who is going to betray him. Our Lord knows Judas Iscariot's intentions; and in spite of this, he reaches out to Judas in love.

Why does Jesus give us a command to love? He gives us this command because something in us rebels against the idea of giving pure, unconditional love. There is a part of us that says, ‘Sure, loving others is great, up to a point.’ It’s easy for us to love in the abstract – the world, and even people in general. We have no problem with that. But it’s people around us that drive us crazy. So we draw a line and say, ‘*These* are the people I’m prepared to love.’ And once we’ve done that, we draw another line and say, ‘*That’s* how much I’m prepared to love that person.’

We are very happy to love in this selective kind of way. We are very happy not to love our difficult boss at work; or the former boyfriend or girlfriend who ended our relationship abruptly; or the relative who treated us unfairly. We are *comfortable* with the kind of love that doesn’t make us feel *uncomfortable*. We might be happy with this kind of love, but it is not what Jesus was talking about. The love that Christ is talking about is love in action that goes right against our human nature. It goes against all human reasoning and logic. It would seem that to love as our Lord loved us is humanly impossible. We might manage it on occasions, but loving others unconditionally and sacrificially all the time is a bit of a tall order, as I’m sure you’ll agree.

How then, is it possible to love? The Scriptures are fairly direct when they state that our *ability to love* comes from our relationship with Jesus Christ. ‘We love because he first loved us’, writes St John.<sup>1</sup> We are able to love because he first *loves* us. Understanding this is critical to our ability to live out the Christian life of love. The more the love of our Lord fills our lives, the more we will be

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Jn 4. 19.

able to love one another with the same kind of love he shows us, and be identified as people who practise ‘disciple love’.

Let’s look at it this way. Let’s say you want to get fit, so you take up jogging. You buy a pair of top-quality running shoes and a track suit and sprint down the street. Not far down the road, your muscles begin to cramp; you feel a stitch in your side, and you can hardly get your breath. You slowly walk home gasping, saying, ‘I’ll never do that again.’

That’s called anaerobic running – running without oxygen. It’s caused by the body using up more oxygen than it takes in. Many people try to run that way, and many people try to *love* that way. They love with great fervour and self-sacrifice. As a result of what we hear today, we might resolve to love, but it might only last a little while, maybe an hour a day. We will find that we can’t keep it up. Like the joggers, we find ourselves down the road in pain, gasping and cramped, saying, ‘I’ll never do that again.’

Love, like running, must be aerobic. Our output must be matched by our intake. Running requires oxygen. An enduring love requires God’s word, his presence, his Holy Spirit, his love and his forgiveness. As we love aerobically, we will love not in our own strength and ability, but in the strength and ability that we receive from Jesus. We will love because he first *loves us*.

Amen.