

I'm going to be speaking to you this morning on our Gospel reading, John 13.31-35 and you might like to have that passage before you, it's on the pew sheet insert, because I think you'll find it easier to follow along.

At first glance this reading might seem like three sayings of Jesus – two of which are quite difficult to understand – the first about Jesus being glorified and the second about him going away – followed, thank goodness, by something we can understand – the 'new commandment' that Jesus gives to his disciples, 'Love one another,' he tells them, 'As I have loved you.'

These sayings initially seem quite disjointed and we might be tempted to jump over the parts we find difficult to the part we can understand and be satisfied with that, but we need to avoid that temptation, because these few verses set the scene for what has become known as the farewell discourses. The farewell discourses are the final conversations Jesus has with his disciples as recorded by St John in chapters 13 – 16 of his gospel. They take place, in the main, in an emotionally charged atmosphere in an upper room in Jerusalem on the evening before the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. So, these words are delivered at a critical juncture, and we can assume Jesus would have given them careful consideration, and consequently we need to listen and, if necessary, grapple with them. And if we find some of the conversation disjointed that's because that's what a highly charged atmosphere does to conversations – they often become a bit stilted as people grapple with their emotions.

If we look carefully at these few verses before us today, it becomes clear that Jesus is trying to give his disciples:

1. An understanding of what is happening at that very moment – because they're confused, they can't understand what's going on.
2. Some foreknowledge of what will happen fairly soon and
3. Some instruction about how they are to act in the future.

Our passage begins with the words, '*As soon as he left the room . . .*' The 'he' here is Judas. The departure of Judas sets in motion the machinery of betrayal, arrest and execution. It's a point

of no return. At that point, Jesus knows for certain that within 24 hours he will be arrested, humiliated and crucified. Once we recognise that, his next words should amaze us. He says to his disciples:

"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him,³³ God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once."

What kind of strange glory is this? As well as being literally a tortuous way to kill people, crucifixion was designed to shame them, to display them publicly as powerless and humiliated. That's not something we would normally think of as glorious – and yet Jesus speaks of it as being glorified! But here's the paradox – for St John the glory of God is seen most clearly at the cross. It is at the cross that Jesus is glorified; it is at the cross that God is glorified because of him, and the glory of the cross is that, as John has earlier told his readers, 'God so loved the world that he gave his son'. To put that another way, the glory of God is the glory of God's love for a rebellious and fractious humanity, and that love is seen at its awful depth and faithfulness, at the cross. 'By this we know God loves us (St P writes to the Romans) that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5.8)

So here, in the opening two verses of our reading, Jesus is trying to help his disciples see that the ordeal that he is about to enter is not simply one of shame, death and defeat – it involves all of those things but God's love in Christ will triumph over them and make the cross the means of victory and glory. All this, Jesus is saying, is happening at that very moment – or at least it's beginning to happen at that moment. The machinery of betrayal has been set in motion, the die is cast, and, one day, his disciples, us included, will come to understand what God's glory really means.

The second part of our reading begins with Jesus, at verse 33, telling his disciples that he will be with them only a little while longer and that, for the time being anyway, they cannot come to where he is going. Again, he is talking about his imminent death – and the fact that even after his resurrection, eventually, he will depart from them. In other words, he is going away and will

no longer be with them. This, he tells them, will happen soon and so he is speaking to them out of his concern that, when it happens, they'll feel abandoned, fearful and alone. It's clear that some feelings of anxiety continued amongst the disciples, because a few verses later Jesus encourages his disciple with a promise that his absence from them is not forever – he will return to take them to be with him. At the beginning of John 14, Jesus says to the disciples: *'Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms, if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that where I am, you may be also. (John 14.1-3)*

This is a promise which extends to us today, and as with the first disciples, it's intention is to strengthen our faith and give us confidence in the future God has created for us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, in our reading, Jesus gives his disciples some instruction about what needs to happen into the future, when he is no longer with them:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

It's clear that it is because of what Jesus has told them, in the previous two sections of our reading, that he now gives them this new commandment. He has told them that he is entering into his glory, which, as we have seen, is code for going to the cross and thus to what they would regard as a shameful death; and he has told them that he is going away and that they cannot come where he is going – so what now? Well, what is to survive him, Jesus says, is a new community.

Jesus didn't write a book about his teaching, instead he formed a community – a new community that was to be characterised by the same love that he demonstrated. Precisely because he is going away, it is this new community, based on his original followers, that will bear witness to him; it is this new community that will continue his life and teaching; this new

community will bring his hope and meaning to others - across cultures and generations. And this new community will be characterised, above all, by a new quality of love. 'Love one another,' Jesus tells them, 'as I have loved you. By this will others know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.' And we see the quality of love that Jesus demonstrates in his death for us on the cross.

Most people in western societies today think of love largely as an emotion. They think of it as warm, positive feelings towards another. The downside of that, of course, is that feelings ebb and flow over time and with changing circumstances. But that's not what Jesus means by love, and that's not what Jesus demonstrates for us. The love that Jesus demonstrates operates on the principle of 'nevertheless.' Yes, like his first disciples, we fail from time to time, yes, sometimes we get things wrong, or we miss the point or maybe we're being a bit slow in our understanding but 'nevertheless' Jesus is constant in seeking the best for us, 'nevertheless' Jesus gives his life for us. It is this 'nevertheless' love that we are called to show to each other within the Christian community, and especially within our local church. It is this 'nevertheless' love that will bear witness to the truth of Jesus.

Sisters and brothers, when each week we declare that 'We are the body of Christ' we are saying that we are Christ's new community, and that, in a real sense, our church community seeks to embody Christ. We are saying that our role is to make him present today, through the life of our community, in Modbury and Golden Grove. And the primary way we will do that is by our 'as I have loved you' love. That, I think, holds a challenge for each of us, me included. All of us, again, me included, can be irritated or even annoyed by the strengths and weaknesses of our fellow church members. The challenge is to overcome such irritation with the love of Jesus, that 'as I have loved you' commitment which seeks the best for our brother or sister. It is that quality of love, that sacrificial commitment to one another that will bear witness to the truth of Jesus.

Lesslie Newbigin, one of the great missionary bishops and theologians of the twentieth century, put the same challenge in his book 'The Gospel in a Pluralist Society'. There he wrote:

'How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only way by which the world will be persuaded of that truth, is a congregation of men and women who believe it, and live by it.'

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."