

Easter 6 Year B

John 15:9-17

You did not choose me but I chose you, and I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Jesus says some memorable things, and that is an enormous understatement. So familiar are Our Lord's sayings to the development of our language and culture that now many of them are used by people who have no idea of their origin. If we were to stand in the Cornmarket conducting a survey, asking people where the phrase "Greater love has no one, than to lay down one's life for one's friends" came from, the answer might well be "war memorials" or "the annual remembrance day service". The words John chapter fifteen would probably not be forthcoming. The familiarity of Jesus' sayings doesn't just cloud their origin, however, it sometimes clouds their meaning. Take this inoffensive phrase: *You did not choose me but I chose you, and I*

appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

How often have we thought what a bizarre thing this is to say: I appointed you to bear fruit that will last.

Fruit that will last. Fruit doesn't last. That's one of the most obvious things about fruit. As everyone who has ever been a student knows, we go to the greengrocers or the supermarket, we buy a range of healthy fruit, we take it home and arrange it carefully and artistically in our fruit bowl, and then we spend the next several days watching it all rot.

Fruit doesn't last. It rots. If it lasts, it's likely to be because there's something wrong with it. Last week I saw some tasty looking plums and, deceived by the memory of that little poem by Williams Carlos Williams, I brought them home and put them in the fridge. A week later they continue to prove themselves rather more suited for snooker than for eating. The same is generally true of those oh so promising pears which we snap up and look forward to eating, only to find that their real purpose in life is to be used as

hammers for driving in masonry nails. Fruit that lasts, isn't quite what we want.

Last week's gospel presented us with the image of the vine and the branches, and the insistence of Jesus that "apart from me you can do nothing". The fruit which the branches, which the disciples, produce, is not something which they have brought into being themselves, but something which stems from the creative power which is the love of God. The outpouring of that love into our lives is what we as Christians call grace. In this morning's gospel, the passage which follows directly, we discover the possibility which grace enables: "as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love". And what is that commandment? "Love one another, as I have loved you."

Often Jesus' chooses riddling images or contrasts with which to challenge his disciples and all who hear his words. In this passage from John, however, things could not be clearer. The command to love is unavoidable.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. It is unlikely that the author of the first epistle of John is the author of the first gospel, but it is also impossible that the author of the epistle knows nothing of the gospel tradition. As Jesus is one with the Father, so his followers will become one with one another, and will abide in him, if they live out his commandment to love. It is the clearest injunction any Christian can face.

What love means will often seem mysterious. Love itself, the love of God, is given without reserve and without control in the offering of Jesus' life to death and beyond. This is not a love which we recognise in ourselves. But we should not focus on our inadequacy, but on the possibility that is within us. The important thing, the gift of God, is the very ability to love at all. That we are able to give of ourselves, that we are able to ask ourselves what is the loving thing to do, is a clue which points to the image of God within us. Although we are bad at loving, the fact remains that it is possible. And if love is possible, everything is possible.

And this possibility opens our eyes and our minds to the image of the fruit that lasts. Fruit is not simply produced, it is productive. Jesus is talking not of some miraculous fruit which doesn't behave the way fruit ought to behave, but of fruit doing what fruit ought to do. He is concerned with the ongoing creativity which comes from the life cycle in which the fruit of a plant bears the seeds of its reproduction. The seed of human fulfilment is the love of God and nothing else. You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you, says Augustine. The love by which we abide, by which we remain in Christ and in the Father, is our motivation, our *raison-d'être*, the point of being alive. The goal of human existence is the fulfilment which is only to be found in God himself – the desire and the ability to love is the gift of God by which we are drawn towards that fulfilment.

So this is the fruit which will not rot. The fruit which lasts, which reproduces, is love. Love remains creative.

It initiates new relationships, it identifies new possibilities, it opens new horizons for all who give and receive it. It is also, according to the Fourth Gospel, the fullest expression of human life. If we wish truly to live, we must try truly to love. In all that we do, and with all whom we encounter, we must have this simple question ringing in our ears: what is the loving thing to do?