

Easter 6 Year A

John 14.15-21

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”

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“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Are those words an instruction? There is a temptation to read them as a sort of emotional blackmail, such as we might associate with a manipulative relationship. “If you really loved me, you’d do x and y” – it’s a simple and rather pernicious argument which human beings are all too fond of making. And that potential misuse of love and its relationship can illuminate our text, because another perfectly reasonable response to “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”, is to reflect on the fact that human beings aren’t very good at keeping the commandments of the Lord. I might want to keep his commandments, and I might manage to do so some, possibly even most of the time. But it’s nevertheless the case that I do consistently fail to keep the Lord’s commandments - every time I am less than

loving, every time I put myself before others. And so I might straightforwardly reflect that it must be the case that I don't love the Lord Jesus, because if I did, I would always keep his commandments. And which of us can say that that is true?

As so often, the answer to these problems is not ours, but God's. If we pick this single verse as a sort of impossible instruction, we are hardly likely to live as God wishes us to live. Jesus says much more in the gospel passage we heard. Love of Christ will mean living according to his teaching, but that is only possible because of a further gift of God, the paraclete – the advocate or comforter – who is the Spirit of truth. That is to say, the gift of Jesus' teaching is given to his disciples, and so also is the ability to live according to that teaching, to know the truth of Christ and the divine life which he shares with the Father and into which he draws each of us.

This gospel passage is full of movement. The paraclete is coming because Christ is going away. But this is not a bad thing, because Christ is going to the Father, and this means that the going away of Christ will be the taking of humanity into the divine life. And so the future truth into which the paraclete will lead the followers of Jesus is the truth that, first, Father and Son live together in a life of perfect self-giving love and, second, that that life is now open to the disciples who are enabled by the Spirit to keep the commandments of Christ and live in love one for another.

This reciprocity of love is the eternal life which the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel brings to those who hear and keep his word. It is the badge of Christian identity: “by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another” (John 13.35); and it is the basis of the life in Christ which the Son’s self-offering will bring about. When Christ has gone away and the Spirit of truth has come, the

disciples will at last learn the fullness of all that has been revealed to them. And what has been revealed to them is nothing other than the life of God. “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

It is no wonder that these verses would prove so enormously influential on the early Christian preachers and teachers who drew out from the scriptures the notion that we call the doctrine of the Trinity, because that doctrine – that God exists in a perfect relationship of self-giving love – is not in any way remote or abstract, but rather an invitation to the divine life which Jesus has proclaimed and demonstrated and enacted in the ministry of the incarnation. Through the Spirit of truth, the disciples will have their eyes opened and will be able to perceive not only the true identity of the Christ who has been speaking to them, but the consequences of that identity for them as human beings, and indeed for every human being. Because when Jesus tells them

that he will be “in” the Father and they in him and he in them, he is telling them that this divine life is what it means to live in love for God and for one another. The truth which the spirit will reveal is the truth that to give ourselves in love is what it means fully and ultimately to be alive.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”. Jesus gives us not an instruction, but a promise, a promise which he himself enacts and brings to fruition. As disciples, those who learn, we are being led into the truth of the divine life, the truth which is love itself, and so we are being enabled truly to love – by the gifts of God in scripture, prayer and sacrament, but just as much in the love of those around us which is itself the love of God at work in the world. “God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.” (I John 4.16)