

### **A new Commandment John 13: 31-35**

Last week I took a lesson in Grade 2 comparing the life that the children's parents lived when they were young with the life they themselves now live. There was a Power point to help with discussion with slides to compare and contrast then and now. I was amazed to see how childhood had changed even over a few decades! Their parents were children of the late 1980's and 90's. The next slides went back to lives of their grandparents, more my era as a post war baby boomer. Again I was amazed at how things had changed! Knowing that the children would think me even more of a dinosaur, I tried to paint a picture of my life as a child of their age in the 1950's.

- We had no television, mobile phones and computers. We listened to a wireless instead
- There were no supermarkets and some of our food was delivered by horse and cart, the milk and the bread and the veggies.
- My toys were a tricycle and we girls played mainly with dolls, prams, tea sets, climbed trees and made silky smooth mud pies.
- I slept on a horsehair mattress with a kapok pillow, both hard and unyielding.
- My mother did the washing on Mondays, boiling up the clothes in a copper. She starched my father's shirt collars and whitened them using a blue bag.
- We did not have a refrigerator but an ice-chest and the iceman delivered a big block of ice several times a week. Woe betide if you slept in on a summer's morning and the block had melted!

There are huge changes over a relatively short time when we look at how we live today.

Jesus brought a huge change in the priorities of the Jewish disciples as he came to the culmination of his earthly life. His words and actions defined what the love of God was like, and they apply to His people today as unchanging directives although the culture we live in today differs markedly from that of the early church.

The commandment we are looking at today typifies Jesus' beautiful character just before the most horrific ordeal of his life was about to unfold. Over the time of his ministry, Jesus said on several occasions "My time has not yet come" But now, His time had come.

In the upper room during the last supper, acts of love were demonstrated by our Lord. He knew what lay ahead and these last lessons in love were vital ones as examples to his disciples. Washing his disciples' feet, breaking bread and pouring out the wine as a symbol of what was to happen to his body and in amongst that with the spectre of Judas' betrayal and Peter's outspokenness, Jesus' gave a new commandment which almost reads almost like a plea, "**A new commandment I give to you, Love one another, as I have loved you.**" Jesus used the word **agape** to express a divine love. It was an unconditional, impartial love that made him willing to lay down his life for us so that we too could have life and friendship with God. He knew how much would be asked of his disciples after he had ascended to heaven and they must have each other's backs as they spread the Gospel throughout their land and beyond. Jesus brought in a new positive imperative, not another set of negatives as in the Jewish law, but a way of relating, one which is also a command for us today as we share life together as a community of God's people.

But here are we too, commanded to demonstrate love for one another and when we do, we shall demonstrate that we are God's people.

Realistically as Christians we know that **our life together is strengthened when our behaviour is consistent with our faith.** Our experience together is not without difficulty as we all have different backgrounds and ideas of what church should be. Many of the letters to the churches in the New Testament give responses to issues that were troublesome to the early church. The Diocese of Gippsland has put out some guidelines to bring clarity to what loving one another in a church community should look like.

1. Being a community:

- We will seek the common good of the church, not just our own interests. That's seeking God's will above our own ideas.
- We will encourage each other to participate in the life of the church. That's service

- We will be aware of how our behaviour affects others. That's reflection with empathy.

## 2. Relating to each other

- We will treat each other with respect and dignity irrespective of ability, gender, sexuality, race, age or contribution to the church—that's inclusiveness
- We will act with integrity and honesty in our interactions with each other, that builds trust

## 3. Communicating with each other

- We will communicate respectfully with others, and not in a way that threatens, belittles or humiliates.
- We will respect confidences and refrain from speculation and gossip. Again, that builds trust.

I would add a willingness to forgive , being kind to one another, tenderhearted for love covers a multitude of faults.

These assurances of behaviour give us a safe space in which we can relate lovingly and respectfully. If what we do does not reflect Jesus, then we are not following His commandment. What he demands from us, he will enable through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit if we take time and seek to listen for his voice and obey with our heart.

Jesus was a living example of love in action, not a love that encouraged people to gratify their human desires to the nth degree but a love that demonstrated empathy, compassion, forgiveness, service, wideness and can I say a creative wildness. It was a sacrificial love that was all encompassing which would not let narrowness, legalism and judgement have a voice over right interpretation of his Father God's intentions. It was a love that welcomed noisy, enthusiastic children, co-opted the assistance of women as well as men and a love that sought to heal and reinstate the outcast. This love was revolutionary and confronting, rescuing people from being caught in the snare of evil, forgiving the unforgivable and empowering the way back to wholeness. It was warfare against wickedness and greed. But above and beyond that, such love for us brought those who believed into relationship with our loving God who co-opts us in the bringing of His light into the world. The question is, how can we fan

this type of love into a flame bringing transformation into our troubled world, troubled lives and troubled hearts? Jesus said, “ By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.” It’s agape love that overcomes.

In Acts chapter 11 we see another astounding change. The disciples, by now empowered by the Holy Spirit, were challenged to extend Jesus’ command to love one another to the Gentiles whom they considered to be unclean and barbarous, outside the covenant promises of Abraham. This was a huge change in their thinking about mission. The Messiah was for the Jews alone so they had thought. When Peter broke one of their strictest prohibitions by associating with the gentile Cornelius and his family they took him to task. But when they heard that the Holy Spirit had descended upon that group, they realised that Jesus commandment was inclusive of every tribe and nation.

There is more to Jesus command when He promises, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

In 292 AD a man named Pachomius was born into a pagan family who lived in Egypt. He was conscripted into the Roman army during an intense period of persecution of the Church. Whilst stationed in Thebes, Pachomius met a group of Christians who were doing all manner of good to everyone and treating all with love for the sake of God. Moved by their compassion Pachomius became a believer. He was later made Bishop of Caesarea and became an influential leader among the men and women who fled from the cities to pursue a more perfect relationship with God in the desert. And thus began the first of the monastic movements. He was drawn to Christ by seeing the love of God in action through the believers in Thebes.

The challenge to us too is be willing to welcome everyone into the fellowship of the church by service to the community in which we live, looking to do the acts of loving kindness that God paves the way for us in our daily life. Are our community programs just being run by the same few people? God has a plan for mission in which all are involved.

In a wider context, the community of Christians as we have here at Moe Newborough, could we not look more intentionally beyond our immediate community and embrace the work of the wider church more fully? In our

intercessions we pray for various organisations and projects, but how much do we really labour with them through our individual prayers during the week? Do we take a real interest for example in the Bush Church Aid Society, learning more of their work and perhaps selecting a mission family to for whom we regularly pray? Do we know about the trip to Gahini in Rwanda in a few months time by our diocese to support the Anglican community there who are undergoing severe hardship because of the withdrawal of aid and political issues? And there is the Modowa Institute in Popondetta, the home of our Priest in Charge. Does God plan to enlist us in supporting that community?

What is God calling/ waiting for us to do as part of his wider mission on earth?

1 John 3: 18-19 states, “ Dear children, let’s not merely **say** that we love each other; let us show the truth **by our actions** so we will be confident when we stand before God.

Jesus gave us a **new** commandment. The word “new” John Barclay states in his book about the Gospel of John has an aspect of freshness to it. We too are on the cusp of a fresh start ourselves, with our new minister, Father Giles and his family who have arrived among us to lead us for at least the next 4 years. It is certainly a new and fresh start for them and so it can be for us.

In July we have a meeting of our congregation to attempt, under God, to develop a vision for our church here at Moe Newborough. For a long time we have perhaps been “flying blind” without a clear idea of God’s purpose for our church and its future here in this place. Yes, the meeting will interrupt our usual program on Sunday but it is of vital importance. It will be a time when we together as a church discern God’s will in relation to His vision and the mission he would have us pursue in the power of the Holy Spirit in our corner of the world. We can be forgetful of the importance of what God has entrusted us with in the challenges and busy- ness of our lives or by the limits of waning capacity. The joy of service is that he enlists us as his friends to be the presence of Jesus in our place of coming together as church and in spreading this love further into the community, our country and across the world.

Judith Lechman wrote: “**When we throw ourselves into religious activities without having made our life one of prayer we run into danger. Our days and nights are filled with teaching or printing a newsletter, working in an**

outreach program or a food bank, an inner rehab project or on lobbying efforts . We feel we are doing the Lord's work and perhaps we are. But we will never know until we take time to listen to his voice and be certain that we are following his promptings and not ambitious ones that start in self. We must always ask ourselves whether we are working to please God or to satisfy our own need for achieving results."

We heard last week, "My sheep hear my voice. " How much time are we devoting to listening as a church for God's direction as we move into what could be something new and fresh that God wants to bring about in our church at Moe Newborough? Let's make a real effort particularly in the weeks leading up to our meeting to discern God's voice as we seek to obey his command to embrace perhaps a new way, to bring about change and to love one another as He has loved us. **Amen**