

Reflection for 18th May (Easter 5)

In today's short reading from St John's gospel, we hear Jesus' appeal to his followers to love one another – an appeal which has, sadly, too often been ignored in the history of the Church. John puts this little passage towards the end of Jesus' ministry, after it has become clear that the authorities are seeking to do away with him. Love is to be the distinguishing mark of his followers, and love will attract others to join their number.

That kind of love is a very powerful thing. When we read in the Acts of the Apostles today how Peter began his mission to the Gentile world, it is love which is the motivation for this mission – love of people beyond the confines of the Jewish race, to whom God wanted Peter to take the good news of Jesus.

If Christians love one another, they will accept each other, listen to one another, and be patient with one another, as they recognise each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Similarly, Christians are called to take seriously Jesus' prayer for unity among his followers, "that they may all be one". If we are to speak to the world about peace and unity, about good neighbourliness and care for one another, we need to be able to demonstrate that love and that unity in our own lives and in our church communities.

At a time when the churches in Britain are searching their souls because of falling numbers, redundant buildings, shortage of funds and shortage of ministers, there is a tendency to look towards technical, management-style solutions to these problems. Some of these may well be helpful, and it would certainly help if churches could co-operate more closely with one another: but the greater task is to learn again the lesson which Jesus gives us in his words from the gospel today. We need to commit ourselves afresh to learning how to love one another, and to love the world he has made, as he has loved us.

Many years ago, in one of the famous meditations by the Roman Catholic priest Michel Quoist, he complained to God that when he tried to fulfil Jesus' command to love, he felt overwhelmed: people made too many demands on him. That is what happens when we open ourselves to love. Everyone who seeks to follow Jesus has a choice to make: either to play safe, and keep the demands of others at a distance, so that they don't disturb us too much. Or to do as he commanded and love without counting the cost – with the reassurance that, as he says to us today, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another".

Bob Whittle