



love in the time of war

Love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you follow my commandments.

As a way into this sermon, please if you can, I'd like to ask you now to think of someone you love. Think of their face. Their voice. What are they like? What kind of personality do they have? What kind of things do they say?

For some of you that might have been pretty straightforward. You thought of the person that you thought you should have thought of. All clear. All fine. That's the person. The obvious person. And if I asked you to say who it was out loud, you wouldn't mind other people knowing.

For others of you, you may not have been able to think of anyone. Followed by a crashing sense of worry that you weren't able to think of anyone. For some of you, you thought of someone you have lost – and it's made you so sad you can't really concentrate on what I'm saying right now. For others of you, you thought of someone who doesn't know you love them – someone you think you probably shouldn't love – but actually, the truth is, if you're honest, you know you do. For some of you, you thought of one of your children. Then the others. Or your grandchildren. For others of you, you didn't think of your children. Any of these might have caused you a bit of a stir.

Love is a word that's said a lot in church. And it's said quite a lot the rest of the week too. Love. It's something we think we agree on – we know what it is – and we're supposed to be something of an expert if we say we are Christian – because it's the thing that Jesus talked a lot about. As he did in today's gospel. Love one another he said.

The easiest sermon in the world to preach would be one where I explore the love that Jesus is talking about, then list all the ways in which you and I don't live up to it; talk about the shortcomings especially of the church, and then say with a bit of a liturgical shrug – well it's all very difficult... but.... come on chaps – let's do our

best. Let's not give ourselves a hard time about this. Love is hard – and, you know, who knows what it is anyway.

This would be the easiest sermon to preach. I could illustrate it with stories of how hard it is to love, and how we angst about it, and remind us of the stories in the Bible about loving and how God loves us but how hard it is for us to love properly, and how none of the disciples really got it.

But I don't feel like preaching that sermon. I feel that if I preached that sermon, I would, even more than in other topics, be really searching for a way to avoid talking about real life.

Because in talking about love, the biggest danger is falling into endless and draining clichés. I'm really going to try, not to avoid telling some truth about love.

It's a commonplace to say that in 2018, the ways in which our society talks about love are pretty narrow. We have narrowed love to mean a set of feelings that are most evident in a short period of romantic sentiment, that gets reduced, especially in film and TV to a formulaic exchange. A build up to one individual saying to another individual "I love you". And an expectation of the reply "I love you too". It's a modern liturgy – like saying – "The Lord be with you" – "and also with you". "I love you". "I love you too".

This exchange is, of course, when it's meant, absolutely beautiful. But, given the ubiquitous and complex ways of loving, it's important to acknowledge too that it's a restricted definition of love and what love is. Therefore, for the purposes of this sermon, I want to acknowledge its beauty and set it aside.

If Jesus had carried a banner around with him, or had been someone with a catchphrase, it would arguably have said "Love one another". He told people to do it: he seemed to be living it. and yet, as far as we know, he didn't go in for that one-to-one romantic exchange – "I love you". "I love you too".

In contemporary conversations about love, there is a lot of discussion about our own agency. It's often said that we have a right to love. It's a key aspect of, for example, LGBT campaigning. You can't help who you fall in love with. Of course this is true.

But the love that is characteristic of Christians isn't so much choosing and claiming this right to love. I really do think that this individualistic focus on our own choices and agency is a fantasy. We are not, despite the yearning of the poets, masters of our own destiny and captains of our fate. We are subject to the immensely complex dynamics and desires of others, their exercise of power, their own ability to love. And we are also subject to the vagaries of our own bodies and their desires, strengths, and sicknesses; we are often too, at the mercy of uninvited dreams and thoughts of the night. So much of our life is frankly "unchosen" – and so rather than focusing on our rights to love, I want to try to talk about learning to love *in the middle of what we have not chosen* – because it seems to me that it's that love that is at the heart of the gospel.

If it is loving in the day to day life that Jesus embodied, then it is loving amidst the unchosenness of life – when you wanted love but couldn't find it, when you mistook love for lust, when you didn't recognize love when it was there, when you've made some choices which mean that you live now in loveless relationships or when you are losing, helplessly, one that you love. How to love in those circumstances?

The love Jesus talks about has a strong element of sacrifice; there is no greater love he says than to lay down my life for my friend. This raises a question for us as disciples: am I willing? If I'm not, or if I find this idea very hard, how does that make sense of my faith?

The possibility of love is held out to us as a defining characteristic of Christian faith. And so the question arises when we try to live this out, setting aside the romantic idealistic love I mentioned at the beginning; what does this love look like? How is it that I am asked to make a connection between my life and yours – what does that mean? Is the church a distinctive kind of community – are we, can we be? Shouldn't we be? Are we at the frontline of loving and if not, why not?

If as St Paul says in his amazing poem about love, (I Corinthians 13) that love is itself patient and kind then I want to add a word to that which is what I find in the way that Christ loves. Love is not just patient in a quietist way, sitting back and waiting to see what happens, Because the love that Christ embodied and that we are asked to take part in is nothing less than revolutionary. So this love is revolutionary kindness. And *revolutionary patience*.

The root of the word patience carries the meaning of suffering, allowing, giving way to. And the way it seemed to me that Jesus loved, was to exercise revolutionary patience. Living now, but according to another timetable, another set of priorities. Jesus stayed beside people as they worked things out for themselves. He answered anxious questions usually with another, patient question. He taught the timeliness of healing, and the timeliness of dying. And what theologians call "the Christ event" – the whole event of Christ's living, dying, rising – is marked by revolutionary patience, which I am suggesting is love in the context of sacrifice, understanding in a profound way, the unchosenness of much of life, not mistaking our human agency for a god-like autonomy, free from anyone or anything else. But instead, a real and profound recognition of our interdependence with all created things.

Jesus's words are embarrassingly clear. Love one another.

And this kind of love is rooted in what I'm wondering might be called revolutionary patience. I have witnessed such love as this recently and I want to tell you about it.

I have just come back from a trip to Syria. I was there for a week. Travelling around, meeting Christians in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo and some places in-between. The tragedy of that country and the trauma of its people is almost unspeakable.

But for now, I want to say that the themes of love, fear, forgiveness, cruelty and bitterness, and toxic abuse of power, were key features of my experience there. One story I will tell you now, which has given rise to this sermon about love. A monk, living in a monastery in the Syrian desert between Homs and Aleppo. His name is Petrus, Peter. He is there now. As Syria is two hours

ahead, I guess he's been to mass this morning and said his prayers. He was kidnapped by ISIS and held for 118 days in 2015. I met him, a man whose long beard and quiet eyes made him seem older than he was. I would guess that he is actually in his 30s. In 2015, he had been visiting the monastery, trying to decide whether he felt a call to become a monk or not. It was while he was visiting that he was mistaken for a monk and kidnapped. He was held in a cell with 4 other people, and he guessed that in the whole building he was held in, there were maybe 200 people. He was held with Muslims and Christians together. He was tortured. And during his time in captivity, his kidnappers held a knife to his throat three times, in mock executions. He told his story in a low voice, a gentle voice. One of the journalists with our group wanted to know details. And so he re-visited his experience – an incredibly generous thing to do for a group of visitors. And then the journalist with us said: do you forgive them?

I found my eyes pricking in the room – there was a silence – but actually Peter himself smiled – as if it were a rather foolish question. “Of course”, he said. “Did they allow you to pray?” asked the journalist, a bit too quickly. “Yes” said Peter. I prayed for the members of ISIS. We'd been praying for them anyway, before I was taken, so I continued. All the time, I prayed for them. It seemed totally obvious to him – not something that required any discussion or elaboration.

It's easy to idolize this monk for his attitude. He is certainly incredibly impressive as a person. Because he is living in a country which has been almost destroyed by the violence of its fearful regime, which continues to bomb relentlessly areas of its own cities. Other parts of the country are at the mercy of terrorist groups yes, but also now at the mercy of world powers fighting a proxy war.

I suppose what I do want to say is that it might seem that there would be more moral clarity in an extreme situation like the Syrian war. Good and evil are cast clearly. So we can, from over here in the UK, make a clear assessment about what is right and wrong in that context, and pronounce accordingly. But that wasn't my experience. It seems too easy from this distance to judge good and evil from far away.

The uncomfortable truth is that many Christians I met expressed nothing approaching this kind of attitude held by Peter. They were distraught, angry, furious with indecisive and contradictory Western foreign policy and media and totally supportive of the government. And, it seemed, they did not want to know the extent of the government's bombing or the torturing in the prisons undertaken by the government in their name. All they wanted was for the “Islamist terrorists” to be destroyed and to get on with something resembling a normal life. And the brutality of ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra or any number of groups active in the region lent weight to this choice.

Peter is an individual monk. He is not a politician, making choices about the deployment of military force – or a freedom fighter, acting for democracy instead of dictatorship. But in the most extreme of circumstances, he was somehow able personally to combat the toxic torturing traumatizing sickness that has overtaken much of the society, and he embodied for me at least, a revolutionary patience that lives according to another timetable, that has committed to love without borders, that will be fierce in love's defence, fearless in somehow finding the strength to forgive. And most especially this struck me because the entire society; its media, its feared secret police, its compliant members of parliament, set in its war-torn landscape, the entire society is telling him to live another way.

There is more I want to say at another time about visiting Syria, and the deeply deeply disturbing dynamics of dictatorship, propaganda, the constant threat of violence and a generation of traumatised children.

But for now, what I do want to say is that we can't excuse ourselves by convincing ourselves that these choices and therefore what love is, are somehow clearer in a war – they often aren't. And the pilgrimage our parish is about to take to Berlin, Nuremberg and Auschwitz will reveal this in our own continent. The complicity of millions of ordinary people, the now shocking film footage of Lutheran bishops standing with Adolf Hitler, and, in that context, the unusual raised voice of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, living by another set of rules; the law of love.

I want to suggest then that the love that Jesus is talking about – is love that has the characteristic

of revolutionary patience: distinctive and challenging, loyal only to the law of love, willing only to obey the command to forgive, energetic in its resolve to live - and willing always to give itself away. This kind of love is lived with a courage that is only evident when it's tried; not afraid to get things wrong, will risk saying the wrong thing, will risk overstepping the mark. Love risks its own reputation in the service of another way.

And a final thing: the tools for growing and cultivating that sort of love are here – in the community of the church- that's why it's important to gather – not to come to church for the sake of it, but to remind ourselves to be brave – to deepen our commitment to the revolution that love demands.

The way that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was able to stand up only 3 days after Hitler was elected – and, against the prevailing view of most of his fellow Christians, challenge the rhetoric of their new elected leader, was because he was rooted in his own spiritual practice, in his theology of God and in the love that is at the heart of the gospel. He was able to make a radio broadcast so soon after Hitler came to power because his life was rooted in another more fundamental reality: He broadcast *Gott is mein fuhrer. God is my leader*. The charge he laid against Hitler so early on was that of idolatry. Prayer, theology, liturgy, spiritual practice – these are the tools at our disposal as we try to commit to love in a time of war.

The love at the heart of the gospel is not individualistic sentiment, or a collection of warm feelings that dissipate as soon as the winds of political complexity start to blow it about.

This love is a commitment to a patience that is at once steely and revolutionary; a refusal to be made bitter or mean, judgmental or even verbally violent. A deep and prayerful recognition that I am complicit in the violence of another, because we are fundamentally interdependent, connected by our creation to one another and to all that lives.

This Eucharist is a broken-hearted celebration of that love, that is embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In that life, we learn that love can't be separated from grief. Our own broken-heartedness finds a place at this table,

where we too find joy – and a revolutionary patience - that gives us the strength to love, even in the midst of war. Amen.

Lucy Winkett