

15 May 2022

Acts 11:1-18
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

In 1988 our house was built for us in Mana, part of what is now Porirua City. This felt a massive and scary step for us: the timing somewhat forced upon us by circumstances; the choice of location and builder determined largely by what we could afford and the financing arrangements available. Poring over the builder's plans and reading the specification, we tried to imagine what it would be like when it was finished, tried to imagine ourselves living in it. When the builder's profiles went up on the site, and when the foundations were constructed, we went through new phases of trying to imagine what it would be like. When the floor went in and the frame went up, we walked from room to room going through a new stage of imagining: at that particular stage it seemed disappointingly small, but we discovered with joy that the completed building would afford us views of the Pauatahanui inlet from the lounge and of the Porirua harbour from the master bedroom. When the gib went in, once again our perception changed; but questions remained – What would the kitchen be like with the joinery in it; the bathroom once the bath and vanity were installed?

Of course, we couldn't really know what this new house would be like until we eventually moved in and started living in it. And of course we adapted to the circumstances determined by the new house, and we also modified the house in some respects over time to adapt to our changing needs and wants.

Our readings today all share the theme of *newness*.

The Gospel of John records Jesus saying to his disciples those well-known words, "A new command I give you: love one another."

Now some may quibble and say there was nothing particularly new about this command to love. The command existed already in the Judaism of Jesus and his fellow citizens, and still exists within Judaism today. Some form of injunction to love

others is found in other religions too: Islam, Buddhism, and the Baha'i faith, for example.¹

So what is “new” about this command to love one another? The newness is hinted at in the rest of the passage. Jesus goes on to say, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another”. The first pointer to what is new is in this “*As I have loved you*”.

So how has Jesus loved his disciples; how has he loved us?

As we look through the Gospels we find that the manner of Jesus' love lay in healing, in deliverance, and in teaching. And we find that at times some of this is challenging. When the rich young ruler meets Jesus and seeks to justify himself, we read “Jesus looked at him and loved him”. But Jesus then challenges the young man's sense of what makes him right with God and the young man goes away crestfallen. To this young man it would not have felt like love.

We all too readily commoditise love; we make it all about what makes us feel good in the moment. But we need only think about how we raise our children to recognize that to truly seek the wellbeing of the other sometimes involves challenge.

Above all, however, we need to remember that the kind of love Jesus is talking about is not cheap. “As I have loved you, so you must love one another”, he says. Jesus' command to love as he loves is given just after he declares that he is now glorified. What is the context of the passage; what leads to Jesus declaring “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him”? It is the Last Supper at which Jesus has served his disciples and set an example for them in washing their feet, and following which Judas has left their company, going out into the night to prepare to betray him; and in a moment Jesus is going to predict that Peter will deny knowing him.

¹ See, for example, the survey in <https://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/importance-love-world-religions>. The basic point was prompted by Vena (see list of Sources).

How did Jesus love us? By going to the cross for us; by undergoing betrayal, arrest, torture, abuse, degradation, prolonged suffering, and death for us. This is the Jesus who says to us, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another”.

True self-giving love is hard; it is done through humble service, in the giving up of oneself for the good of the other; it comes in the midst of betrayal and denial. True self-giving love is undertaken in full awareness of the cost and consequences.

Tom Wright remarks that

Love is all about the other person. It overflows into service, not in order to show off how hard-working it is, but because that is its natural form.

This is to be the badge that the Christian community wears before the watching world. As we read [this command] we are bound to cringe with shame at the way in which professing Christians have treated each other down the years. We have turned the gospel into a weapon of our own various cultures. We have hit each other over the head with it, burnt each other at the stake with it. We have defined the ‘one another’ so tightly that it means only ‘love the people who reinforce your own sense of who you are’.²

“As I have loved you, so you must love one another”. This is the new commandment. And like the house under construction, we can’t fully imagine what living in this love might be like, because we don’t yet experience its fullness and completeness. But we continue to work towards that day, trusting the God who is the ultimate builder and architect.

This new commandment of Jesus is not something incidental. It is of the essence, because it is of the very nature of God, a true expression of the Father’s heart for his creation.

² Wright, *John*, pp.55-56

And because the Father's love is for all of his creation, the commandment to love extends beyond the "one another" within the Church to those outside it. A significant part of the reason the Church grew so dramatically during its first three centuries is that it demonstrated its love for others. In a culture in which children, especially girl children, were not valued, many newborns were dumped to die by exposure. Christian families expressed their love by rescuing these newborns and taking them into their families, despite the fact that another mouth to feed was a significant cost for the Christians who were, by and large, not well off. The example of costly love was part of what caused early Christianity to flourish and multiply rapidly.

Our post Easter readings have had us looking a bit at Peter. Beyond the experience of forgiveness when Jesus reinstated him after threefold denial (of which we read a fortnight ago), Peter went on to encounter God doing another dramatic new thing, a new thing which arose from and was made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection.

The background to Acts 11 is that Peter has been asked to go to the house of the centurion Cornelius. For Peter, a Jew, to go to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, a soldier in the army of the Roman oppressors, is a profound challenge to his understanding of what is right. For a Jew like Peter to eat with such people is unheard of. But God has given him a vision: Peter says, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean."

Following the resurrection of Jesus, the early church had to examine all that it had inherited – the Torah (the Law), its rituals and customs, worship in the Temple, the abiding connection with a particular land, the sense that the people of God were defined through racial and tribal identity – all these things had to be looked at afresh. The early church faced a completely new context. Was the building that was the Judaism they had inherited a fit dwelling for their life after the resurrection? And as Peter was to discover, racial identity and the markers of that identity were no longer material to the question of whether one could be a child of God or not. What Jesus had done fulfilled Israel's purpose in God's plan. Israel had been established to be a light to the nations. Israel as a nation had failed in that purpose; but in Jesus,

Israel's Messiah and representative, the purpose had been accomplished, and now Gentiles too could be brought into God's purposes.

God was doing a *new* thing through Peter.

Situations change. If Christine and I were having our house built today we would do things differently. Part of this would revolve around our own choices. Part too would come from the decade in which we live, in which understandings of the suitability of certain materials have changed; in which there are new appreciations of insulation and weather-tightness and suitable heating; and in which there are societal debates about long-term environmental impacts and the appropriateness of building ever-larger houses, and so on.

The question of what is fit for the context challenges the church in every age. The essence of the good news of Jesus remains constant, but the language and symbols and methods we use need to be examined afresh as the culture in which we live changes. In the eleventh century Anselm of Canterbury explained the significance of the cross in terms which are largely unintelligible to the West in our day. Using categories understandable in the feudal society of his day, he characterized the problem of sin in terms of it bringing dishonor to God as Lord. The willing death of Jesus was, he said, an act which provided "satisfaction", restoring honour to God, demonstrating devotion to the offended Lord God,.

We in the West don't think that way these days. However, Anselm's way may be a bit closer in understanding to some other cultures where concepts of honour and shame are key drivers of attitudes and behaviour, as I found when once talking to a man of Chinese origin.

The world changes; society changes. But God is still *for* all the world. And that requires that we always be asking God what is his *new* thing, what is appropriate to say and do in this time and place so that we communicate and live the gospel.

God says, "I am making everything new!"

In Revelation 21 and 22 we are presented with a vision of the completion of God's redeeming, re-creating, work. And we struggle with this vision. We don't know what it will be like because it is not built yet, and we're certainly not yet living in it. What

Revelation presents us with is not even a set of plans: it is more an artist's impression of what it will be like, and this is not an artist working in a Photo-Realistic style, but perhaps something more like Expressionism or even Cubism!

So we have to take God on trust. We trust that in God's love – his self-giving love expressed supremely in his dying in the person of Jesus on the cross – and in God's power demonstrated in raising Jesus from the dead, he will bring all things to newness again, that there will be no more mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. The picture presented in these two chapters is of the renewal of all creation, a new creation in which the two parallel realms of existence, heaven and earth, are joined forever so that God will dwell in the midst of his people.

In the meantime, we are called to follow Jesus' example of sacrificial costly love, and to be creative in living and proclaiming the good news of Jesus' reign in ways that are intelligible and meaningful to the contexts in which we find ourselves. In this way we are, in a way, building towards this new creation in which we will dwell, even though we can't see it yet.

He who is seated on the throne says, 'I am making everything new!'

Sources:

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