

Sixth Sunday of Easter

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on 6 May 2018

Readings: Acts 10 verses 44-end and John 15 verses 9-17

In the gospel reading, Jesus connects loving God with loving each other: 'You are my friends (my loved ones) if you do what I command you.'

But this is not so easy to understand. For how can love emerge from command? This is our experience of human relationships. Love must be won, and cannot be extracted by edict. And friendship dies if one partner starts to issue orders to the other. Friendship grows out of mutuality and sharing, not authority.

The answer in part, of course, is that we are dealing with God here. He does have a certain right to call the shots! But that is not the whole answer. Further reflection takes us to the heart of the Christian understanding of 'law'. Does Christianity mean living by certain rules of conduct, which describe Christian life?

The importance given by Jesus to the Ten Commandments (such as when the rich man asks Jesus how he shall inherit eternal life) suggests that the answer is 'Yes'. But John helps us to dig deeper. John shows Jesus calling his disciples 'friends' rather than 'servants'. 'Servants' are those who simply receive a command, and obey it. 'Friends' enjoy an altogether different relationship.

Why then all this talk of obeying commands, expressed even as if obedience were a condition of continued friendship: 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love'? The answer is that these 'commands' are not rules of conduct, in the sense of the laws by which Christian life is lived, but they are the outworking of the relationship into which we have entered with God through his Son, Jesus.

Every relationship exerts constraints. They are summarised in the marriage service by the vows the couple take. These vows then become, not commandments imposed by an outside authority, but the tracks on which their marriage runs, the air that bears them aloft together, the soil out of which their relationship will feed and grow. Jesus' 'commands' are like this.

That is why 'his commands are not burdensome': once you are in love, it's not difficult to do what the relationship demands.

Not difficult ... perhaps. But possibly very challenging and costly. Peter certainly found it so, the day he went to Cornelius' house to speak about Jesus. He found that the Holy Spirit had got there first. And so, for the first time in his life, Peter had to suppress his scruples and enter a Gentile home, to eat and sleep there. Love demanded no less – and opened the way to the amazing possibility, recounted in the first reading today, from the Acts of the Apostles, that baptism was for Gentiles just as much as for Jews, that their new faith in the risen and ascended Jesus was a gift for the whole of humanity, without exception or qualification, for people of all races and languages. The old days of hatred and enmity were to end. Precious inherited ideas and old preferences, such as treating Gentiles as distinctly inferior and outside God's embrace, had to be put aside in the face of the new reality of Jesus.

For he who loves the parent loves the child, and the friends of Jesus must be wherever he is, and love with his heart.