

**St Botolph's Church Worthing**  
**Fifth Sunday of Easter 24 April 2016**  
**John 13: 31-35, Revelation 21: 1-6**  
**Father Roger Walker**

We heard just five verses of St John's Gospel this morning, and amazingly they contain three important pieces of teaching from Jesus. He began with some rather puzzling words, beginning: 'now is the son of Man glorified' and in two sentences He uses the word glorify five times. We did not really understand this – and I don't expect the disciples did either. For in this context glorify is a theological word expressing the unity between Jesus and his Father.

Once again Jesus is telling those who have ears to hear that he is the Son of God, and because of this he is able to make his second statement: 'I will be with you only a little longer and where I am going you cannot come'. This is a prophecy of Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension. So we have here theology and prophecy, both of them quite puzzling at the time. But Jesus' third piece of teaching is very straightforward and one that impinges upon the life of every Christian for he says 'love one another as I have loved you'. He goes on to stress the importance of love by saying that loving one another will show people that we are Jesus' disciples.

We have three profound pieces of teaching here – theology, prophecy and a challenge – and it is the challenge that is the most important to us as Christians when we read these words. For we know that Jesus is glorified: united with his Father: three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one God as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity teaches us. We know also (as the disciples did not) where Jesus was going: to be with his Father in heaven.

We have seen the prophecy fulfilled with Jesus' Ascension, but we struggle with his challenge, 'love one another as I have loved you'. If we confine this to our congregation here at St Botolph's, can we really say that we all love one another? It would be stretching things, wouldn't it? For we know that, while we could say it about some people, there are others with whom our relationship is a bit distant.

So let's have a look at what this word love means in Biblical terms, for it has become rather debased in our common usage. The Greek of the New Testament has four words that we would translate as love. I won't give you a Greek lesson now, but the word we are looking at in our Reading today is – in the Greek – agape. This is the highest form of love and is usually defined as 'seeking another's highest good'. That is probably not how we would define love but in Christian terms – especially in the context of today's Reading – it makes a great deal of sense.

It also enables us to look more clearly at what Jesus meant when he said 'love one another as I have loved you'. He wanted his disciples' highest good, and he wants our highest good: this must surely be that we are saved from the power of sin and death and come to eternal life. We want this for all those

who are around us today. So we want their highest good: we love them. But is this a bit of a cop out? For we are living in this temporal world and for each of us there will be a different highest good in worldly terms.

So as we look around at our fellow Christians today, Jesus does not want us to feel warm and fuzzy about them but to ask ourselves 'what can I do that will be good for them?' Just thinking and then acting in this way will produce a sense of closeness and community among us. This will be obvious to anyone who observes us, just as, on the other hand, hypocritical behaviour will be. Way back in the second century the early Christian theologian Tertullian was quoting people saying 'see how these Christians love one another'. This made a great impact and helped cause the rapid growth of the Church at that time. Amazingly, so did the persecutions which were happening, for another famous saying of Tertullian is 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'. We are very unlikely to be able to bear witness to our faith by martyrdom, but we can do it by loving one another: seeking others' highest good. And, of course, this trust extends beyond the family of the Church so that we Christians are seen to be loving caring people in a world that is so often just the opposite.

This is our challenge from today's Gospel Reading: to show this agape love that seeks the highest good for others, but the theology and prophecy in the Reading reminds us of the need to deepen our faith from which this love flows. Faith in the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one God – a teaching which, incidentally, our friend Tertullian was the first to expound fully – and faith especially in Jesus Christ, risen and ascended, who opens eternal life to us and to all who accept and follow him.

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

24.4.16