

Dear Friends

As we launch into 2017 we have a new Church Text: “A new command I give you: love one another.” John 13, 34.

This is of course a familiar verse, words on the lips of Jesus himself, and these are comforting, even comfortable, words. And yet let us not be lulled by what these words might actually look like for us this year. First off, this is a new command for the followers of Jesus – it’s not an optional extra that we might like to include. In the talk through of Holy Week that we have regularly included with JAM Club each Palm Sunday, we reach Wednesday “when he gave his final instructions” – and this is part of that instruction. It’s teaching to be heeded, it’s a message to be heard, it is a command to be obeyed, for us to obey indeed.

But in John 13, there are other dimensions to the background of this phrase. For instance, Jesus repeats the instruction in just the following verse, but with a different twist. This is not just a commanded instruction, but an instruction that invites us also to consider an example, and indeed to copy it - “as I have loved you ...” This surely offers us the scope to look again at who Jesus is, and all that he does, and then to model our lives on his. To be like Jesus is not something that we can accomplish in our own strength and of our own resources, but with God’s help, we can look at Jesus and we can become like him, and not least in the qualities of our love for one another.

And yet there is more, for within just a few further words Jesus uses this same expression again, and yet once more there is something different about the way Jesus says it. A note of conditionality is introduced “...if you love one another”, as if there was some option about what has already been given to us as a command and demonstrated for us as an example, but this is to miss the point of what Jesus says: “By this, will all people know that you are my followers, if you love one another”.

Alongside the command, and the example, there is actually a yardstick. We will be measured, and not even just by the Lord, but by others, for the way that that we obey this command, and follow this example. It’s a test, it’s a challenge, it’s a real exercise for us to put into action!

It is evident that we will need to give ourselves time and space to consider what this familiar sounding and yet seemingly somewhat daunting church text means for us during the coming year, and of course we have only considered the background to these words, and not begun to look at their direct meaning – perhaps there will be some surprises there too!

But finally, in another place within the early church, the writer indicates, and encourages us, that it is not an impossible task! “See how these Christians love one another!” says Tertullian, often regarded as the father of theology (at least among those writing in the Latin language).

What a great prospect then that others looking at WRBC during this year still ahead of us might see in our love for one another something that is not just obedient to Jesus’ command, and that mirrors Jesus’ example, that measures up favourably to the standards and expectations, but something that yet exceeds these in ways that are noted and noteworthy, that are appealing and even attractive!

Friends, let us indeed love one another!