

I remember one time putting our older son to bed around the time he had just started school. He asked me ‘Daddy do you love me this much?’ – his hands would have been just a few inches apart. Then step by step his hands got further and further apart, with the same question, ‘Daddy do you love me this much until the hands were at full stretch. I suppose he was rejoicing in the fact that there seemed to be no limit to our love for him.

I often think of this idea of love at full stretch, when I reflect on the passage we read as our Gospel reading for today, with Jesus’ command,

‘³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.’

His disciples are to show something of that love at full stretch that Jesus is about to show for them.

As we proceed through this season of Easter our Gospel readings turn from accounts of the resurrection to accounts of his teaching in the Upper Room on the night before he died. In one sense these are looking back, but in a more profound sense Jesus is looking forward – looking forward to the life and mission the disciples are called to live in the light of his death and resurrection.

The writer of the 1st Letter of John sums this up beautifully in the words

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. *1 John 4:19*

Love is not just to be our experience – it is to be our vocation. It must lie at the heart of who we are as individuals and as a community.

³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ *John 13:35*

Love has a power to change – change people, change situations..

There is a very powerful illustration of this in the film of Victor Hugo's novel, 'Les Miserables'. Jean Valjean had been held as a prisoner for many years in appalling conditions. On his release as a convict he could not obtain work. He is allowed to stay in the house of a Bishop who provides hospitality. During the night Valjean, in his desperation, steals from his host:

Video clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF3FX43F-7Y>

Jean Valjean my brother, I have ransomed you from fear and hatred and now I give you back to God. There is a power of love given freely, unconditionally. As the film progressive we see that that act of almost irrational, generous love transformed Valjean from the man embittered by his unjust imprisonment in to the man he really was. I think of the words of the hymn 'My song is love unknown':

Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be
Love transforming the loveless into the lovely – into the loving.

There is a further truth that is embedded in that classic 'Les Miserables' by Victor Hugo:

"And remember, the truth that once was spoken: To love another person is to see the face of God."

Love transforms not just the beloved but also the lover. When I love I see my beloved in a completely different light. When the Bishop looked upon the dishevelled prisoner brought before him by the officers, he saw not the man who had robbed and assaulted him the previous night but a man broken by life

and in need of healing – in that irrational act of unmerited love they both encountered God.

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As I have reflected on this passage this week, as I have watched that short video clip, I come to see in God’s love not just my experience but also my vocation, my calling; that we might be ones in whom and through whom God’s love, God’s healing reconciling love is to be shed abroad in the world.

Then the world will know that we are his disciples - not so much by the words we speak as the lives, transformed by our own encounter with Christ, that we live. St Francis of Assisi once said, ‘Preach the Gospel at all times – and if necessary use words.’

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

‘Preach the Gospel at all times – and if necessary use words.’