

If you think about it, I mean really think about it, forget what you expect to hear in church and just imagine that you're hearing someone else say it somewhere else. Different person, different context. If you make it wear those clothes put it like that, if you really think about it, Jesus said some pretty odd things. Lots and lots of the time.

*I am the true vine.*

*I am the bread of life.*

*I am the resurrection and the life.*

*I am the living bread.*

*I am the light of the world.*

*I am the Alpha and the Omega*

*I am the gate.*

That's just St John's take on Jesus describing himself. I know you're used to hearing those phrases, but think about it. That's some pretty odd stuff to say, never mind to say about yourself. Yes, we're talking religion here; you don't expect God talk to be the same as school gate chit chat talk or ordering a takeaway talk or it's nan on the phone talk. You know it's going to be a different sort of talk, you allow for some odd in there. But still:

*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away*

*It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.*

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.*

*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.*

Odd, odd, odd, odd. If somebody started talking to you like that on the bus you'd be hiding your panic, making your excuses and off the next stop wherever it was. Well I know I would.

Sometimes the odd things that Jesus says are obviously odd, sometimes scarily odd, sometimes odd if you spend a few moments thinking about it and sometimes they don't seem odd at all. Sometimes every time you hear some of the stuff Jesus had to say you don't think 'how odd.' Not until you actually sit down and think hard about what's actually being said do you think, "You know, that really is odd".

It's in that latter category— looks normal on the outside, not until you get inside do you realise something weird is going on— that category of odd that I would put the words we heard Jesus speak in the gospel tonight, in particular this:

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

Now probably you're thinking that it's me that's being a bit weird suggesting that 'love one another' is an odd thing to say. Clearly it isn't odd. It's not an bizarre aspiration, it's a great one, it's not an strange thing to hope for, it's a wonderful thing to hope that we can love one another. It's not even an odd thing to observe: 'look how those two love one another.' So 'love one another' is not odd in the way that 'I am the gate' is odd or 'tear your eye out' is odd. But think for a second and 'love one another' is a very odd thing to *command*.

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.*

However you look at it, it is an odd commandment. 'Love one another'. If the commandment is 'take a pigeon and sacrifice it to the Lord' then it's straightforward enough: catch your pigeon and take it to the priest who'll turn it into a pleasing odour for the Lord. If the commandment is 'circumcise all your male children' then it's straightforward enough. As long as you can run faster than them you can catch your son and take him to the priest and hey presto! Commandment fulfilled. I'm sort of glad we Christians dumped that one. Even 'Give to everybody who begs from you' may be challenging but it is doable. You put your hand in your pocket and give.

But how can you make yourself love somebody? *Can* you make yourself love somebody? If we're in reasonable health we might have control of our body so we can perform a particular act: cut a heifer in half, burn a bird, walk barefoot to the festival or whatever. But we're not really, even if we've spent years practising, not really in control of our hearts. So how, can Jesus command us to 'Love one another'? How can we possibly fulfil that commandment?

The answer, I think, is that although we can't force the feeling, we can do the work. We can see what love looks like and then copy that. Even if we don't feel the love we can still do it. Do you think that's hypocrisy? I'm not sure. And if it is, I don't care, because I don't think there's any other way to keep that commandment to love one another than to walk the walk whether our heart is in it or not.

There's a good chance, behavioural psychology tells us that if you do something you'll eventually start to get the feelings associated with it. Force your face muscles into a smile and you will feel a bit happier. Only a tiny bit, but you will. Do the thing, keep doing it and it you might end up doing it automatically. Keep doing it and you might just end up believing it. Act love first and you will in all probability feel love later.

I hope that that sounds reasonable enough. I reckon that's a good place to start. But it's not the starting that's difficult: it's the keeping going. Because loving might take you into some hard places, places you'd rather not be, places where your every instinct is screaming 'get out'.

Loving might mean washing somebody's feet. It depends on the feet, it's not always a pleasant task. Loving might mean cleaning somebody up when they can no longer control their body: never a pleasant task. Loving might mean, as is did for Mary and the women at the foot of the cross, washing a corpse. Always a hard task.

And it only gets worse. There's a point where the love command really kicks in, a point where it really bites, a point where it becomes difficult. If you feel it, no problem. If it's the love of your life or your family or your bosom buddies, no problem. But problem is, when Jesus commands us it's not that lot. It's just anybody. It's just people. It's just, as well, worst of all, your fellow Christians. These are the people you must continue loving, past the point when it becomes a chore, past the point when you really don't want to, past the point when you'd rather be anywhere else, past the point where you're gagging and fighting for breath. And then when you've held your nose and forced yourself... it only gets worse.

You've acted out love, and you'll find yourself hated for it.

When we love as Jesus commands us, we are breaking the most fundamental of human barriers, we are taking a sledgehammer to one of the pillars of human cultures, we are breaking down the distinction between us and them. Make no mistake, they will hate you for that.

Humans are social animals and the very core of that sociality is us/them-ing. Christian love is, in this sense, profoundly , disturbingly anti-social. Nobody's going to thank you for that kind of love.

But that is Jesus's commandment.

And the response is no surprise:

Later on in his speech we heard part of tonight, the speech where Jesus gives his commandment he says

*"If the world hates you remember it hated me first"*

This is what your love will mean, this is what your love will provoke. Perhaps this is why groups that the world hate are often the first to get the Christian message, because when they see Jesus, they see themselves. *They understand.*

We can react in various ways to this hate. We can try to make the world love us. They won't.

We can try to persuade the world to love the same things as we do. Unlikely.

Or... we can try to challenge the notion of hate.

And the way we do that, is to keep on loving.

It's what Jesus would do. It's what Jesus did.

*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.*