

Once again, we have a trio of readings on which a lot could be said about each, or I could attempt to mix them all in. Instead, I'm going to focus on our gospel reading which, in spite of being only five verses long, packs a punch that is most definitely worth focusing on.

Not it's unfortunate that our Gospel reading doesn't start one verse back because it adds an additional note of drama that helps sets the scene, illuminates as it were!

That verse states – “so when Judas had taken the bread, he went out at once. It was night”.

John uses the word 'night' to represent darkness which symbolises evil and ignorance. Right at the start of his Gospel in 1.5 “the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it”. The creative Word of God was the source of life as we read in Genesis and if humanity had only realised it, the life supplied by this Word was its light – the light given by God to walk in. Humankind rejected this light through sin and the introduction of the darkness of evil into God's creation.

Think of Nicodemus in chapter 3. Ancient Jewish literature tells us that God showed his approval of a certain rabbi's teaching by working miracles through him. To Nicodemus, who is a member of the Sanhedrin or governing body, Jesus' marvels mean just that. And so he comes to Jesus out of the night and salutes him as a great teacher. The first disciples had recognised Jesus as a teacher but soon progressed beyond that as we read in the succeeding chapters of John. Jesus of course, shows Nicodemus that he is a 'teacher from God' but in a way that Nicodemus does not expect: that he has *actually* come from God. At the end of the discourse, Nicodemus slips back out into the night where the significance of the incarnation is developed.

So, as already mentioned, in John darkness represents evil; with Jesus, the light has come into the darkness. But the darkness will not receive this 'light' and this very refusal constitutes judgment.

And so it was with Judas. “So he took the morsal and left at once. And it was night”.

With this It's almost as though official permission had been given to Satan's agent, Judas, to begin the process that would put Jesus to death and in so doing he has begun his rise to glory.

The announcing of his departure is for his disciples a tender and sorrowful farewell. And his farewell gift is to be a new commandment – of love for one another, a keepsake of Jesus' presence and the last glow of the light of the world.

As the door closes on Judas a sense of excitement seems to grip the narrative. It is as though Jesus draws the eleven closer to himself, saying new things that, perhaps he couldn't say in Judas' presence. Also, he must say them now and quickly because Judas has gone out and he knew his time left was short.

A possible analogy for this intensity of teaching and guidance is with a person who learns they have a terminal illness and their life will end soon. Lists are quickly drawn up, people seen, wishes given, affairs put in order; intimate conversations held. There is an intensity of activity whilst time allows.

This is where, what we call the “Farewell discourses” really start. The disciples had been asking Jesus questions from time to time but from now on until the end of chapter 16, Jesus is explaining to them the fact that he is 'going away' and that they can't follow him just yet. He is showing them what it all means for their future life, their own sorrow and joy and

mission in the world. This will end with the great prayer of chapter 17 after which the story picks up again with the arrest in the garden.

These chapters are full of comfort, challenge and hope, full of the deep and strange personal relationship that Jesus longs to have with each of his followers. They are, not surprisingly, full of great theological insights of a sense of discovering who the true God is, what he's doing in the world and in us.

Jesus talks of the 'son of man' being 'glorified'. He used that term back in chapter 12 where he speaks of *God* being glorified and of the 'son of man' being 'lifted up'. Now he puts the two together. As in Daniel (7), 'one like a son of man' will be exalted, coming on the clouds to the Ancient of Days and the whole scene will be the moment of God's glory, revealing who the true God is, over against the dark forces of the world that have resisted him and trampled upon his worshippers. Jesus is overwhelmed with glory, with the coming events as the unveiling of God's glory, with his own vocation rushing towards its conclusion and bringing God glory.

Jesus is also overwhelmed by the fact that he is going to leave the disciples behind. He has only been with them a short time and now he must go. The disciples seem to have learned so little or grasped what Jesus has been doing in their midst. How will they cope without him?

The answers will be revealed over the next three chapters. The promise of the coming holy spirit who will continue to guide them as he has been doing. But, before that he offers them something else: the simplest, clearest but hardest command of all. Love one another.

Jesus describes it as a 'new commandment'. Love is central in many parts of the OT. In Leviticus (19.18) the Israelites are commanded to love their neighbours as themselves. The newness is not in never having heard such words before so much as the mode of this love, the depth and type of this love: love one another *in the same way that I have loved you*.

If its been hard enough for the disciples to appreciate what Jesus has been doing on their behalf, now he's telling them to copy him. As with the footwashing, they are to look back at his whole life and to find in it a pattern, a shape, an example, a power. In order to wash another's feet you have to think of yourself as a servant. Now that can lead to a sort of inverted pride if not careful, inverted pride in one's humility. But with love there is no danger of that because the action is all about the other person. Love is all about the other person. It overflows into service because that is its natural form and is not showing off how hard-working it is.

Then of course we come to the killer words – "this is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another". Ouch! How often have we turned the gospel into a weapon of our own various cultures? People have been burnt at the stake, torn limb from limb because we have ignored those words and defined "one another" so tightly that it means only 'love the people who reinforce your own sense of who you are'.

You could say the whole gospel is concentrated into these nine words – "love one another; even as I have loved you"

Its not simply the positive commandment replacing those negative "thou shalt nots", it's the second part "even as" that is the true foundation of this love. But and this is the crunch – we cannot be ordered or commanded to love. Only love can beget love; we can only love in response to being loved, only know what love is if we are loved.

Just as a baby learns to smile in response to its parents' smiles, learns language by being spoken to and thrives in their loving attention and it's a fact that babies and children who are not loved do grow to become smaller as adults and more troubled. So it is that the very possibility of love can only be learned in response to the love that finds us first, finds us before we even know what or who it is that has loved us.

Follow that logic through to our spiritual selves. We love as we are loved, and Jesus makes the new commandment possible because of the utterly new and radical way in which he has loved us: absolutely, unconditionally, without reserve and to the last drop of his heart's blood.

Amen