

Today I'll start with a simple analogy.

Many, perhaps most people aren't that good at recognising trees

Especially if it's winter and the trees have lost their leaves.

But when spring comes it can get easier to tell,

And when the trees start to bear fruit,

Then it can become obvious what sort of trees they are.

If I see apples growing on a tree,

Then even I know that we've got an apple tree.

In fact *everyone* knows, even a little kid –

You don't need a degree in botany to spot an apple tree,

Not when it's weighed down with crisp, sweet apples, at least.

Now listen to what Jesus says to us, his disciples,

In today's reading from John: **'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'**

If we have love for each other,

The same sort of love that Jesus has for us,

Then *everyone* will know that are disciples, we are students,

That we are apprentices of the true Master, Jesus.

They won't need to have a degree in theology or philosophy

To recognise that we are people who have been taught by God.

Today I'm proclaiming Good News from God's word:

Our Lord Jesus has laid down his life for us, his friends,

So that we may walk in his light,

So that we may love one another;

And he has even given us a new command,

To eat and drink His body and blood in remembrance of Him,

So that, in receiving forgiveness from God,

We may receive each other as brothers and sisters,

And so that the fruit of God's love may be seen among us.

In today's reading, Jesus is speaking to his disciples.

He's speaking to them after they have eaten the Passover together,

After he has washed their feet,

After Judas has gone out into the night to betray Jesus.

It's the night before he is going to die, and he says: **'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'**

Now in the English language this can be a little unclear.

After all we can 'love' our favourite shoes, our country,

A flavour of ice cream, our football team, our spouse, or even God.  
But the sort of love that Jesus is talking about  
Has a specific shape.

Listen to how Jesus goes on to describe *this* love  
As he teaches his disciples on the night before his suffering and death: **'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.**  
OK: here we see that the sort of love that Jesus is talking about  
Is sacrificial love: the same sort of love that Jesus is about to show  
As he goes to the cross to take away the sin of the world.

We get to know *this* sort of love, to experience it,  
As we receive it from Jesus: as we trust  
That he is not simply our teacher, but our Saviour:  
That he gave his life to take away our sin,  
To bring us into the Father's home,  
And to bring us together with brothers and sisters  
From every nation, language, and tribe.

In fact, Jesus goes on to say, it is in receiving his sacrificial love  
That we become friends of God.

Listen to what he says: **You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.**

Servants just do what the boss says they have to do.  
The boss doesn't give reasons for his commands,  
But demands blind obedience.  
But we are *friends* of the Lord Jesus,  
Because he lets us in with what he is doing:  
He shows us the love of the Father, and draws us into this love.

I'll pause here.

The friendship that we have with Jesus,  
The fact that he laid down his life for us,  
The way this reveals the Father to us:  
This gives us light from God.  
When we look at ourselves, the difficult situations we face,  
The relational conflicts we may have,  
When we see these things in light of God's love for us,  
We receive wisdom from God,  
And the freedom to love as we have been loved.

And Jesus makes clear that this is all the result,  
Not of our commitment to him, of our choosing God,  
But of God's gracious love for us.

He says: **You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.** John 15:12-17

We don't become disciples of Jesus by becoming fruitful.  
Rather, our Lord Jesus calls us to follow him,  
He lays down his life for us, his friends,  
So that we may love each other,  
So that this good fruit may grow among us.

Later on in the Bible we hear this same sort of teaching,  
As the Apostles hand on to us what they received from Jesus.

Listen to this from 1 John, but as you listen  
Remember that this is not Jesus speaking,  
But someone that Jesus sent to speak his word to us.  
It's the same teaching,  
Given to the same Christian community, to us.

Here it is: **Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.**

OK, at this point what he is saying is a little cryptic,

But listen to how he goes on: **Whoever says, 'I am in the light', while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.** 1 John 2:7-11

Through baptism into Christ, we are members of the one family,  
We are brothers and sisters in the household of God.

If we hate our brother or sister:

If we condemn them, or shut our compassion toward them,  
Especially when we have plenty and they are in need,  
Then we walk in darkness, then we are spiritually blind.

But as we love we walk in the light:

We walk in the light of the love of God

Revealed to us in the self-sacrifice of Christ,

And it becomes clear who we are: disciples of Jesus

The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

And on that note, let's return to today's reading,  
And listen again to what Jesus said: **'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'**

Remember when Jesus said these words?

It was the night before he died.

And do you remember a new commandment that Jesus gave us,  
That he gave us on the night when he was betrayed?

Out Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when he was betrayed,  
Took bread...

He said take and eat, this is my body...

He said, take and drink, this is my blood of the new covenant,  
Shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

Our Lord gave us this command so that we as disciples,

As brothers and sisters in the household of God,

Who do not have in ourselves the ability to choose God,

Or to love each other in a self-sacrificial way,

Or to forgive each other from the heart,

He gave us this holy meal so that we may receive his forgiveness,

And in together receiving forgiveness, have the freedom

To receive each other, and to live in love with each other.

When this love is evident among us,

Then *everyone* sees who our teacher is: the Lord Jesus.

Then *everyone* sees whose disciples, whose students,

Whose apprentices we are: we are disciples of the Lord Jesus.

One thing we never need to do is give up.

Jesus speaks his Spirit-filled word to us,

And we can trust that he is growing his good fruit among us,

Fruit that will last.

We can trust that he who has shown his love for us

In laying down his life for us,

Will free us also to love one another,

And that through this, his light will be seen in our world.

In Jesus' name. Amen.