

Sermon – Sunday 19th May 2019 – 9.30 am

Some of you may remember the hit US sitcom, Friends. Over ten years, the storyline followed a group of six friends, three men and three women, in their twenties and thirties living in New York and looking, mainly, for love and happiness. In one episode, one of the six, Ross, is talking to his friends about a situation he has found himself in with his girlfriend, Mona. After having a photograph of them both taken on a trip to an ice rink, she decides that they should use the photo on joint Christmas cards.

The conversations that follow are vintage Friends. As soon as Mona leaves the room having made her suggestion, the male friends congratulate Ross on his engagement. For them – as for Ross – sending out joint cards means you're in a serious relationship. But Ross isn't sure that the relationship is that serious yet.

So he seeks advice from the female friends. How can he make a gesture which shows that the relationship is moving forward, but isn't as serious as sending out a joint card? Monica suggests asking her to move in with him, but Ross says that's way too serious. You could make her a mix tape, is the next suggestion. But that's not serious enough. Phoebe then chips in – how about giving her a key to your apartment? No, says Ross, we were closer with the mix tape. Have you told her you love her, says Monica? I'm not sure if I'm there yet, says Ross. I could tell her I love spending time with her. No, say both Monica and Phoebe. That's a real slap in the face.

You get the picture. And of course by the end of the episode Ross is getting the locks to his apartment changed, having given Mona the only key in his desperation not to have a proper conversation about where the relationship is going.

Talking of love is big stuff. As the writers of Friends were aware, talking of love within an intimate relationship can be a risky business – whenever we reveal our feelings, we become vulnerable. At the other extreme, when I was teaching, it could sometimes feel like groups of teenage girls were constantly gushing with their love for everyone. And then there are those confusing expressions of love. I'm ashamed to say I may have used the phrase myself, but have you ever had one of those conversations in which someone says, "I love so-and-so to bits, but it's just so maddening when he does..." And you're left wondering what kind of love it is that is being spoken of.

One of the problems we have when talking of love is that one word describes so many different feelings, emotions, motivations and actions. Famously, CS Lewis explored four kinds of love, starting from different Greek words for love. The love being explored in the scene I have just described from Friends is eros, romantic love, the love defined as "being in love" with someone. Philia is the love between friends, a sibling bond. Storge is defined as an empathy bond, like the love of a parent for their children, a strong bond of affection. And finally there is agape love, the unconditional love that in the King James version of the bible is often translated "charity" and encapsulates the perfect love of God.

In this morning's gospel reading, when Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another" it is the agape kind of love that he is talking about. His greatest desire is that his followers should emulate the kind of love for one another that he has shown them. It's a big ask. There are times when love comes quite easily. When we like people; when we have positive feelings

towards them; when they treat us kindly; when there is mutual benefit from one another's successes.

But that's not the whole story. Just think about the ways in which we try to legitimise our own failures to love. Distinguishing, for example, between the deserving and undeserving poor. That keen sense of fairness that many of us have, which can so easily lead us to resent those we consider to have been more fortunate, or feel superior to those less fortunate. Fighting for justice is important, but if we're honest with ourselves, our motivations may not always be pure.

Jesus knows that giving his disciples a new commandment to love one another is a big ask for them too. He knows because he has experienced human life from the inside, and he knows how it feels. He knows our mixed motivations, our frustrations and resentments. And because he knows, he also helps us. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." That's the crucial clue which gives us hope and a sense of direction.

The passage from this morning's gospel reading comes directly after Jesus has washed his disciples' feet. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. That's the key, really. We are called to practise love by doing as Jesus did. His starting point is not actually that we should have warm fuzzy feelings about one another, but rather that we should serve one another. The perfection that Jesus knew because he is God is not something we will attain, at least not in this world, but unconditional love is something we can practise through our actions in the world. It's why we are disciples – we follow Jesus, seeking to do what he did, to follow in his footsteps. Whenever we spend time with those on the margins of society, we are practising love. Whenever we offer to do someone's shopping, or pick someone up, or look after our grandchildren, we are practising love. Sometimes it comes easily and sometimes it doesn't, but we are called to keep practising.

In the last week or two, those of you who give money to St. Mary's on the planned giving scheme will hopefully have received a letter thanking you for your contribution to the life of this place. Donating money to various causes – including the church – is another way in which we practise love. I am very grateful for the love expressed by this congregation through financial giving. It makes a difference, and provides the means by which we can continue to reach out in love to our community and beyond.

Our calling is to love one another as Christ loves us. To use the gifts that we have been given in the service of others. Sometimes it comes easy; sometimes less so. But the call is to keep on trying. To keep on practising. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Amen