

Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland

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The mark of a follower – John 13:31-38

The city was in festival mood as it celebrated Passover, and yearned for liberation. But one gathering that evening felt different. It had a different feel and was not a comfortable place in which to be.

Jesus and his followers had gathered in secret. While there was a sense of anticipation, there was also one of foreboding. This was the first time on this visit they had dared to stay in Jerusalem overnight. Every other day they had retreated over the hill to Bethany, out of range of those determined to silence Jesus. But not this night. Moreover the evening had not started well. Jesus' followers had been embarrassed.

Standing on their own dignity, they had deliberately bypassed the basin of water at the door, meant for washing dirty feet, thinking it someone else's job. But they hadn't included Jesus in that equation! How ashamed they felt to see their Master kneel down and carefully wash their feet. The silence was deafening. If only they could have wound the clock back!! Their foolish pride condemned them.

Later Jesus took the Passover meal and introduced a new sacrament of bread and wine that spoke of his broken body and shed blood. Yet they had still returned to the familiar argument about who was the greatest. Into their complacency and self-regard Jesus dropped a bombshell. One of them- would betray him! Can you imagine how they looked around at each other? For some it brought a blush of fear- "Surely not I!" Then Judas left. "And it was night", and it was- in every sense.

Despite the strained atmosphere, Jesus used the time to the full, for he had much to say. Forewarned was to be forearmed, not to cope better with the present but to understand the future looking back. It would not be a good night. Protestations of loyalty would not prevent failure- but failure will not be final.

Just when things couldn't get any worse, they did! Jesus said "I am going to leave you and soon." It threw them completely. Though he was the one needing comfort he had to spend time comforting them saying in effect, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. I will not leave

you as orphans. I will give you another helper, just like me, to be with you, the Holy Spirit. I will use you to bear fruit. I will strengthen you to face opposition. And I will pray for you and keep on doing so”.

Jesus then gave his followers a new command. As he would be leaving them they needed this to hold them together. It would be their distinguishing mark, the mark of all followers of Jesus- no exceptions.

When Lesley Newbigin said that the church was “the hermeneutic of the gospel” he meant that the church was a visual aid made up of men and women, young and old, drawn from different backgrounds and cultures, yet held together in love.

Outsiders could only make sense of the Church, by recognising the transforming power of the gospel. How will people know you are my followers? It is not by what you wear, not by what you do, but by how you love. “A new command I give you. Love one another.” “As I have loved you so you will love one another.” Here is the mark of a follower- “By this all will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” It is not by circumcision or Sabbath keeping but love shown within the community of faith.

But, you might say, what is new about this command? Are we not called already to love our neighbour? Didn't Jesus even call on us to love our enemies? Surely that covers all our fellow Christians and sometimes twice over!!!!

What is new is not the command to love but the model he gives for loving. “Love one another as I have loved you.” Love motivated Jesus. Jesus' love is now to mark his followers.

Love for one another means getting down on your knees washing dirty feet, not despising menial tasks.

Love for one another means putting your own feelings behind you so you can encourage and support others who are struggling with fear or failure, with deceit or denial.

Love for one another means taking time to explain and apply the great truths of our faith, so they strengthen faith, kindle hope, and bring life.

Love for one another means sometimes speaking truth, but gently whilst reaching out to give support and standing by them.

Love for one another means praying for those who are slow to grasp but quick to boast, who let you down but you will not give up on them.

And, on that night, love will mean Jesus will face his future when everything inside him shrinks back; when he longs for another way, but in the end will choose to do God's will.

In that longest of all days that had now begun, love for one another would mean enduring scoffing, beating, mockery and the final agony of the Cross, that they might know forgiveness, love, life, hope and peace. That is what love looks like. It has no limits- it is love to the death if need be or, if not, then such love involves a host of minor deaths each day.

This love does not depend on the loveableness of those being loved. In his ministry Jesus had been committed to their wellbeing. He had taught them what they did not know. He had advised them when they needed counsel. He had stood up for them, protected them and sometimes in love rebuked them, but he had never stopped loving them.

We so often reduce love to a feeling when it is a command. It is seen not just in words but in action. Such love is not a victim of our emotions but a servant of our wills. We meet around this table to take bread and drink from the cup bound by the command to love one another. Perhaps you felt that at Heart and Soul? Will you still feel it during impassioned debate this week? Can we disagree without being disagreeable?

Will our love for one another show when we go home and talk about the Church and this GA? Will our love for one another show when we return to our own congregations and the challenges they present? Will foot-washing love, cross bearing love have found fertile soil in our hearts?

If we love one another we will not qualify what we say by adding the word "but,"

- They are nice people BUT...
- I like them, BUT . . .
- They do a good job, BUT . . .
- It's a good Church, BUT .
- They're a good Minister, BUT . . .

What the world needs most if it is to believe, is for God's people to do what Jesus says - no "ifs", "ands" or "buts".

Such love is seen when we are kind and compassionate to each other; when we forbear and forgive, speak well of each other, and build each other up. We show love in action when we

practice hospitality, encourage, comfort and pray for one another and bear one another's burdens.

Then the world will know that we are for real and that the gospel does make a difference. So as we now gather around this table sharing together in the deep things of our faith, let us ask God's forgiveness where we have failed and his grace that we might show that we are Christians by our love. In so doing we are following Jesus.