

In today's gospel, Jesus again repeats his final command to his disciples: love one another. So unambiguous and so difficult. But is it really that hard for us to love each other? Maybe not. There are a couple of things I think we could remind ourselves of.

Firstly, loving our brothers and sisters has nothing to do with liking them. We're not commanded to like anybody. Liking is the most shallow, superficial and short-lived feeling we could have for anyone or anything. Love is always an act of will. It may *affect* the feelings and *affect* the body – it nearly always does – but it doesn't begin there. It begins in the will. I can't will myself to *like* others, but I can will myself to *love* them, because love is always an act of will that results in deeds. If my neighbour was in terrible trouble and asked for my help, and if I gave it willingly – no matter what I *felt* about him personally – I would be loving him.

Secondly, we cannot really love anyone else unless we first love ourselves – which is precisely why Jesus said: "Love your brother and sister as you love yourself." He just assumed that

we have a healthy degree of self-love. It is healthy because those without it are needy and clinging; they are hypersensitive and their relationships are chaotic; they are always afraid of making mistakes, they are not able to be assertive and are not good at communicating what they think and feel to others; they are constant worriers. If any of those could be said of us, we maybe need to love ourselves a little more. There is nothing selfish or sinful in this: it means valuing ourselves, recognizing our great dignity and worth in the eyes of God. If we can do that, then we can also value and recognize the dignity and worth of the addict slumped in a filthy blanket in a doorway. Actually, one makes the other possible – which the Lord Jesus was perfectly well aware of.

Thirdly, we came forth from God for a single purpose: that every created being should be eternally one with him, beyond time and forever, in a union of love. Love was the beginning of our existence, and love will be the summation of it. As Eucharistic Prayer 4 says: “On that day we shall see you, our God, as you truly are... we shall become like you.” In other

words, we were created to become God-like. St Irenaeus said: “God became a human being in order that human beings could become God.”

The final destiny of the creature – except that although it is final it is *now* – is to be eternally united with the Creator so that each sees, knows and loves itself in the other. Crucial to the recognition of this destiny is the love of our brothers and sisters, whoever they are. Mystics of all faiths across the ages have tried to express this union in words, but it goes utterly beyond all words. I want to finish by sharing two of my favourite quotations. The first is from the Persian mystic and poet Jalal Rumi:

“The Beloved has permeated every cell of my body. Of myself there remains only a name. Everything else is him.”

And the second is from the medieval Christian mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg, who said:

“I who am Divine am truly in you. I can never be sundered from you. However far we wandered, we can never be separated. I am in you and you are in me. We could not be any

closer. We two are bound into one, poured into a single mould.
Thus, unwearied, we shall remain forever.”

Like St Paul, who was the first to say:

“Not I who live, but Christ living in me.” (Gal 2:20)