

Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children and live in love as Christ loved us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have good news and bad news for you all.

The bad news is that now is a very bad time to be a Christian. We live in an era where easy answers are popular, where black and white is more popular than grey, where people want to easily fall behind dividing lines and snap judgements. Such a time is a bad one to be a Christian because Christianity offers none of those things, and, more than that, tells its followers that such answers are wrong ones.

The good news is that, contrary to what the news might tell us, in the sweep of history this era is nothing special: it has never been a good time to be a Christian. Because authentic Christianity is hard. Really, really hard. The nature of the world, of membership of the fallen human race, is that doing as Paul says in our first lesson today- to be imitators of God as beloved children and live in love as Christ loved us- is difficult.

We, Christians, are- as we heard in the Gospel- to partake of the bread of life. We are not called to partake in a message of death. We are called to live in direct imitation of the one whose body is the bread of life itself, of Jesus Christ. And that same Christ is above all else, perfect love. It is therefore as agents of love, as people who are loving,

Easy, you might say, I'm nice to people, I love my neighbours and my family and my friends, I give where I can, I try my best, I'm not an active menace to myself or others! Isn't that enough?

More bad news. Wonderful though all that is, as much as I would strongly praise and encourage it as symptoms of a happy and kindly life, as much as it is an outworking of love, the essence of the love we have heard about in our lessons today is something more than that: it is not earthly wish fulfilment, not worth doing simply because it is nice. It is worth doing because it is the direct imitation of the Divine, of God himself.

And because it imitates God, Love is not an easy answer nor an easy path. Far from it. In this age of easy solutions- of convenient half truths- of food and drink for the soul or the mind or the heart which appear to do the job but soon we find we are hungry and thirsty again. Love is not one of these. Love, the love of God turned man, the love of one prepared to die and then rise for us: that love is very difficult indeed.

Why? Because it means loving those we disagree with. Loving those whom we are disgusted by. Loving, as Christ did, those who would threaten us. It means loving those whom we believe are doing wrong. Loving the outcast and the reject. Loving those whom others refuse to love. Loving not those whom it is easy to sit alongside, but those whom we find it most difficult. That is true love. That is loving as God loves us.

Now loving like God does, does not mean condoning, does not mean enabling, does not mean unequivocally supporting. Loving as God does does not mean simply

writing off things that are wrong, giving a carte Blanche to behaviour that is wicked or harmful. It does not mean excusing some people because we like them and judging others because we don't. Because the truth is that that is not love at all. After all, God does not simply say to us- do what you like, behave how you want. Because those are not instructions that we give to people we care about. Love does not exist as a vacuum of morality.

We know this is true from our own lives: which of us could stand up and say that every part of our lives is perfect, is worthy of blessing and support by God. I certainly cannot. We think and do and say things we ought not to. Yet we can still say that we are loved of God, loved by God. The Divine love does not condone evil or violence or even the everyday sins of which we are guilty: but what it does do is say the solution is not more of the same. The cure to hatred or fear or judgement or sin is not the continuation of those cycles. Rather it is love.

How does that work, you can hear the cynics cry. Well: it works like this. Love calls us to be more and feel more and, in turn, to love more. It calls us to look on those who fall short in love and so break the power of violence and hate because the love of God has broken the power of death and sin. Paul tells the Ephesians and tells us that we must love because to love is to imitate Christ. Jesus is perfect love, love to the point of sacrifice: our difficult call is to love in the same, sacrificial way.

There are times we will fall short of that calling to love, as individuals, as a community, as a Church, as a nation. Yet the other thing about God's love is that it is eternal and unchanging, it is regardless of our failings and our fears.

But the final news is good. No; it is more than good: it is the very best. That same love is here, now amongst us, in word and in sacrament. That same love spoken of in the Gospel, that same food which will not leave us hungry is here, amongst us now. It is the love found in the very bread of life which we will share, the spiritual food of that same body- the body of Christ- which was broken by forces of hate and yet was reconstituted in and as love.

Come and receive it. And as you do, in the midst of this broken world, know healing. In the midst of this fallen world, know grace. And in the midst of this hating world, know love.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.