The first part of today’s gospel reading was used at my retreat before I was ordained a deacon, and the focus was on the word abide. The word doesn’t just mean to be somewhere, it means to remain in a place. To abide in God’s love means to remain in God’s love and never leave.

When I heard it said that way, it changed my perspective on the phrase “so I have loved you; abide in my love” To remain in Jesus’ love really did make the joy of the occasion of my ordination complete.

In the heart of Today’s gospel, we find a command that is as profound as it is simple. A command that echoes through the ages, speaking into the hearts of Christians in the past, in the present and in the future. Shaping our lives, a command that sounds simple, but isn’t without its challenges, a command to Love.

Jesus was that command in action. A love that is selfless, sacrificial and transformative. We are called to be Christ-like, and this is the challenging part. To give of ourselves a love that reaches out to the marginalized, the forgotten, the unlovable. A love that builds bridges and brings healing. In a world that can seem quite superficial at times where everyone seems to be in search of their moment in the spotlight, it can be all too easy to trample on those around us.

Jesus showed us his greatest act of love when he sacrificed himself for us. He tells his disciples “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” This is a passage that is read quite often on Remembrance Sunday, it is probably one of my favourites. Many people gave up their lives for their comrades and friends.

But who are our friends?

If I were to ask how many friends you had, what would you say? 1 or 2? 10? Or would you look at your social media accounts? The maximum allowed by Facebook is 5000. I don’t even think I know that many people.

But what are you willing to do for your friends? Drop everything at a cry for help? Be a shoulder to cry on in an hour of need? Give up everything you have? This is the love Jesus commands us to have for one another, a love that is willing to sacrifice, willing to give, willing to serve.

But this command, isn’t just about our relationships with each other, its also about our relationship with God. God’s greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. And our love for God is shown in this commandment.

If we can live a life of love, abiding in God’s love, then we can build a community of love in Christ’s name.

This brings us neatly to the first reading from Acts. The Holy Spirit descends on the people who were listening to Peter’s message, even the Gentiles.

This was an still is a ground breaking moment. EVEN the Gentiles!!! The Holy Spirit wasn’t just for a select few! It really was for everyone, No caveats, No conditions to be fulfilled, no entry requirements – EVERYONE!!!! Regardless of background. God calls us all, and God calls all of who we are into this community. Even Peter says “Can anyone withhold the water for Baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit?”
Can we really go against what the Holy Spirit has done. If someone has accepted Jesus into their lives and is full of the Holy Spirit, then who are we to stand in the way of that? We've done a good enough job of messing that up in the past, but fortunately for us, God usually finds a way of sort it out in the end.

The unity that we find in Christ is not a superficial one. It is not based on shared interests, common hobbies, or even familial ties. It is a unity that is born out of our shared faith in Jesus Christ, our shared experience of God’s love, and our shared hope in the universality of God’s promises.

So, as we reflect on the unity that we have in Christ, we also are reminded of the diversity that is within the Christian community. The early church was made up of people from all walks of life, yet they were all one in the fellowship of Jesus.

That diversity is even more relevant in today’s church. We are not on a production line trying to churn out Christians that look the same, sound the same or speak the same language, but we should be striving to create a church that allows people to be different, unique, the person that God created them to be. Yes, we may all interpret scripture in a slightly different way, but if we can discuss that and work with that, we can grow in our own understanding. We can challenge ourselves, just because we were told something in our youth when we went to Sunday School, doesn’t mean that it was necessarily right or wrong, but if we wrestle with our own understanding, listen to others with differing viewpoints, can we say that we have reconciled our faith, then can we grow, and grow together in mutual love and respect for one another.

The theme of mutual love is woven into the very fabric of our faith. But how good are we at it? The love we have for each other is not a sentiment or a fleeting emotion, It is a deep, abiding love that reflects the very nature of God.

If we look at ourselves as the love we are reflecting, are we proud to say that we are reflecting God’s love into the world? CS Lewis wrote “Love is not an affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person’s ultimate good, as far as it can be obtained.” That encapsulates the love of Jesus, and the love that we are called to. It is a love that seeks the ultimate good of the other person, a love that is steadfast, a love that is unwavering, a love that mirrors Jesus.

So as we leave, and we say, well that’s all very well, but what does that mean for us. Well, we’re not always going to agree with the people around us. And to love as Jesus calls us to love will be challenging. If someone hurts or upsets us, it is particularly challenging to love that person. But I want you to think of this, and it is something that I remind myself often. “you cannot look into the eyes of someone God doesn’t love.” And if you are struggling, find the part of them where God is abiding and that is where you can find the love of God.

So as this is my final service with you, before I return to my parish, I would like to thank you all for welcoming me into the family that is Derby Cathedral, and I would like to think I leave here with some more people on my list of friends. And, I would like to pray – May the love of God surround you, the peace of Christ uphold you and the power of the Holy Spirit empower you, now and always. Amen.

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