

JOHN 13:31-38  
LOVE ONE ANOTHER

The picture on the screen called *The Shadow of Death*. It was painted in the 1870's by an artist called Holman Hunt as he spent time in the Holy Land and sat on the roof of his house in Jerusalem. It shows the inside of a carpenter's shop in Nazareth and, stripped to the waist, Jesus stands by a wooden trestle on which He has put down His saw. He stretches, raising both arms above His head and as He does so the sun streaming through the door of the workshop casts a shadow on the wall. The shadow is in the form of a cross; the tool-rack makes the shape of the horizontal bar onto which, it appears, His hands have been nailed. There is someone else in the picture, a woman kneeling on the floor, amongst the wood chippings, her hand resting on the chest in which the rich gifts of the wise men are kept. She is looking up at the shape on the wall, startled to see this cross-like shadow! We can only imagine what is going on in her mind; we can't see her face!

Holman Hunt is not painting a scene that he knew took place, but he is making a statement. It may never have happened quite like this in the Nazareth workshop, but from very beginning of His life the cross hung over Jesus like a shadow. From his birth, when the wise man gave Him myrrh, the symbol of suffering, through His baptism to His ministry and mission, the cross loomed over Jesus like a shadow; He was always heading for Jerusalem and the cross; it was always his aim and goal in life. The Cross (and the resurrection) has always been at the centre of the Church's life and message: how many cathedrals have huge crosses on top of their golden dome or huge spires? How many are built in the shape of a cross? One key feature of church life, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper takes us back to the night before Jesus died and to His gift and sacrifice of His life for us and for our salvation. The cross casts a shadow over us and so it should be.

John 13 takes us to the Upper Room on the night before Jesus died. Two things have already happened: Jesus has washed His disciples feet and Judas has left to go to betray Jesus. So Jesus has already demonstrated something of His love in the foot-washing and death is starting to loom, at least in Jesus' mind, because of what Judas has gone to do. In what happens next we see how clearly and strongly the cross is in His mind and how the cross not only shapes what Jesus does, but the cross shapes the challenge He leaves for His disciples. There are three little pieces to this story, each with its own piece of cross-shaped shadow.

*"When he..." (John 13:31f)* 'Glory' is one of these words that everyone knows about, but is really hard to define. It starts with light and shining bright-ness: in the Old Testament when God appeared in His glory it was connected with a dazzling light from which people had to hide their faces. It came to mean being exalted and praised and honoured and it is in that sense that Jesus uses it here: "the moment that Judas left is the moment that brings supreme honour to Jesus." (Tasker) The moment Judas left is the moment when Jesus is committed to the cross and the glory of Jesus has begun; the paradox is that His glory is connected with something which appears to be the very opposite. The cross, for everyone, was a place of shame, pain and death; there was nothing glorious about death on a cross, it was the place of criminals. Yet, for Jesus His mission has always been cross-centred; it was the place where He would complete His mission to save the world; the place of shame and pain would become the place of salvation and, because of the resurrection, the place of glory for Jesus; for Christians it would be the

place where love would be defined forever. Judas has left and the moment for Jesus to be glorified has come.

It was also the moment when Peter would put himself in the way of the cross: *“Lord...” (John 13:37)* He professes his loyalty and his courage; he is ready to die with Jesus and for Him. In fact, it will work the other way round: he is not ready and Jesus will lay down his life for Peter. We have to say that Peter was probably genuine: in the Upper Room, he meant what he said and at that point he thought he was ready to go with Jesus to the cross. But, when that love and devotion was tested, his courage failed, his loyalty gave up and as Jesus predicted, Peter denied Jesus three times. Later, Peter would go to the cross for Jesus; another time his courage and loyalty would not fail and he would become a martyr for his faith; in turn, his life and death would be shaped by the cross.

That leaves us with the piece in the middle of this conversation: *“A new...” (John 13:34f)* The disciples are to love one another and their love for one another is to be the hallmark of their new life together and of the Christian church. In some senses, this command is as old as time; love has been at the heart of the Bible's description of good relationships ever since the days of Adam and Eve. It was turned into a code in the days of Moses, when people were to care for one another and especially for the poor and vulnerable in their society, widows, orphans and strangers; and the Old Testament law gave all kinds of practical ways by which that love was to be expressed. Good Bible relationships have always been marked by love for one another. Nothing has changed: good church relationships are to be marked with love, but now there is a new thing added, a new dimension!

What makes this a new command? It seems to me, the context in which these words are set and the example we are given give this command a whole new dimension and focus. *“A new...” (John 13:34)* These words are spoken as Jesus is putting on His coat to go out into the Jerusalem night and to Calvary. I don't mean that literally, but the context in which Jesus gives us this new command is the shadow of the cross. The example He gives us is the example of His own love for us; as He has loved His disciples, so we are to love one another. We could take that in the light of what had just happened: Jesus had just washed their feet and used that as example of their service to one another; *“so our love for one another is a foot-washing love!”* Well, yes it is, but it is going to be so much more. Jesus' love for His disciples is about to take on an even bigger dimension: He is about to lay down His life for them; He is about to die for them as their Saviour, such is His love.

As Church, we are a wonderfully diverse group of people; no two of us even look the same. We are all kinds of different personalities: some of us are more easy-going than others; some are more intense. We come together as the Church of Jesus Christ and how are we to get along? Well, we've learned to put up with one another, perhaps, to recognise our differences and get on with life together tolerating these differences and getting along! That sounds fine; any group of such diverse people would do that and would be OK, but for one thing: Jesus didn't command us to put up with one another or get along or tolerate one another; He commanded us to love one another. Any definition of love for one another, will have to take account of the fact that Jesus' description of our love for one another is shaped by His love for us; it has to be cross-shaped love.

Set aside for a second the cross as the place where Jesus saved us and look at what lay behind His going to cross. It was our sin that took Him to the cross, but it was also His

love that took Him to the cross. He willingly embraced the way of the cross because He saw that we needed Him to save us. His concern was not for His own glory and fame and the fact that He would be talked about for generations afterwards as the One who was crucified; His concern was for us and for our need of a Saviour and His love was such that, gladly and willingly, He gave His life to be that Saviour. That is the example of love for us that Jesus gives: we put up with one another and that's fine as far as it goes; but Jesus' command and example is bigger than that. He wants to take us further than merely putting up with one another. The challenge for us here is to be willing to sacrifice something of ourselves for one another, for people to whom we have no family ties, for people we may not even get on with very well, but love for one another challenges us to be willing to give of ourselves for others. This is cross-shaped love; cross-shaped love is to be at the heart of the Christian Church.

"See how these Christians love one another" – that was what the first century world said of the early Church and people were drawn to Jesus; the hallmark of that Church's life was its love. The hallmark shows that the piece of silver in your hand is genuine; you see the hallmark and you know that you have a real piece of silver; no hallmark, it is a fake! "*By this...*" (*John 13:35*) People sense these things; people who are new to the church sense what goes on, they get a sense of what this group is like. Here is a hugely challenging question: what do people sense about the Church in Scotland today? What do people sense about us as a congregation? The best answer would be that they sense "see how these Christians love one another!" If it is something else, then we have to repent of our falling short and start over to love one another as Jesus has loved us. This is about being friendly, but more than that; it is about getting on well together, but more than that; it is about putting up with one another's foibles, but more than that. Cross-shaped love is about putting the other person first, about caring for their needs, about being humble in the way we think, about forgiving those who cross us, about being patient with people we find difficult, about being thoughtful in the way that we speak, in what we say to and about one another. This love is to be expressed at home and across the world.

Being a Cross-shaped Church? We have a Saviour whose focus was on the cross; it had been for all of His life; but when Judas went out, that was the moment to which everything else had been building up. God would be glorified by the cross; the plan was complete; mission accomplished! Peter would stumble at the cross; his worst failures would be described in the story of the cross forever. Love would be cross-shaped: Jesus' love for us would be seen at its fullest, biggest and deepest when He gave His life for us; there is no greater display or demonstration of love than the One who gave His life for the sake of others. Our relationships with one another are to be shaped by the cross: we are to love one another as Jesus has loved us. This is a huge challenge and we will always fall short, but we have to aim. It is so easy to be content with less: to put up with one another and tolerate one another; it is much harder to commit to one another, to care for, support, pray for, be patient with, forgive one another; this is cross-shaped love!