

Well, I don't know if you've noticed – but it appears something quite interesting has been happening to the readings that the Church has allocated to the main Sunday services over the past few weeks since Easter.

Now, far be it for me to suggest that the Church of England is anything other than organised, or that it in any way drags its feet... but it seems that scarcely have we left Easter behind than almost unusually, we are pressing onward like latter-day St Pauls towards the goal of Pentecost. In many ways it is as though we have entered another period of preparation, similar to Advent and Lent.

What makes me say this? Let's look at the evidence:

In the first Sunday after Easter, in the Gospel, we learn of the discovery of the empty tomb and the appearance of the Risen Lord... and the sharing of this Good News amongst the disciples. Re-forming them from the shattered and scattered individuals they'd become.

The second Sunday finds Jesus instructing Peter to look after that re-formed community; his 'sheep'...

Last Sunday, we heard how Jesus cares for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep. We are gathered together under his protection. We know his voice, and we follow him.

And then, in the reading from Acts this Sunday, what do we hear? We hear of Peter acknowledging the extending of this community to include Gentiles – us.

And, in the Gospel, Jesus categorically gives us a definition of what defines us as that community.

Just one thing – Have love for one another.

Before our very ears, we are hearing, week by week, step by step... the risen Jesus building his Church.

This church.

The church created and sustained by gift of the Spirit, which we celebrate at Pentecost. Constructed on the corner-stone, the foundation that is Christ.

Are we his church though? Do we know his voice and follow him? How do we hear his voice? Well, as we've just noted, Jesus tells us this: we hear his voice if we have love for one another. Simple.

But is it? Is it that simple? Having loving for one another?

In many ways, we can see the logic in how we should have love for the poor, and the disenfranchised, and the suffering... all at the margins of society.

We can also see – though it's a little bit harder – how it is good that we can have love for ones' enemies.

But, surely, anybody can do this? Be charitable to those who are less fortunate than ourselves, be gracious to those who are ungracious towards us. You don't actually need to be Christian. Don't even need to be religious. Just have a strong sense of the worth of humankind...

So what makes us Christ's church?

Well, theologically-speaking, it's because we are Trinitarian. We profess, in the creed for example, our belief in Father Son and Holy Spirit. And that's something, doubtless we will look at towards the end of the month.

But – and this is perhaps the hardest thing of all, which is why Jesus charged us with working at it – we are Christ's church, Christians, if we have love for one another.

That is - have love for the person in the pew next to us; the people in the churches down the road; the people in all Christ's churches overseas.

Loving properly and well can be hard. So Christ created a learning church. A church based on what might be called a Christian ethic. That is, we are called to practice 'right behaviour' with those closest to us until it becomes second nature. And we are given this so that we can take that witness of Christ's love (to one another) and roll it out into the world.

Of course, no one said as we started out on our Christian journeys that things would be easy. No one ever said being in community with one another would be a piece of cake. In fact, sometimes, it can feel quite the opposite, can't it?

The thing is, just as it is in all families, it's the wrestling with the difficulties, the challenges, the set-backs and the tragedies, that is actually the whole point.

That's why, for example, it's considered an immense struggle – but a struggle worth persisting with – to try and keep the Anglican Communion together.

And we can play our part on a day-to-day level. Now, thankfully, St Mary's is not a church that is beleaguered by division and profound doctrinal disagreements. But I daresay, like any church, and any family we can have our moments.

However, the point is that we will – all of us – find opportunities in our church lives to practice the Christian ethic. The formation of a Christian life which has at its very heart – the fundamental concern of our Founder and sustainer – the observance of the command to have love for one another. For Christ is still building – building the new heaven and the new earth of which Revelation speaks.

But note the wording. Have love. Not 'be in love'.

It's not the kind of love we sometimes find in frothy pop songs, blinding and transitory; nor the kind of love proclaimed, for example, on the football terraces, blinkered and exclusive.

Christ's love for his people is a different, more powerful and more substantial thing, unconditional and inclusive. This love is, if you like, a tool we need to learn to use with care and skill. It is an instrument for good and for change. Used properly, and with integrity, it has an effect; among us and out there in the world.

We need to return to it again and again; listen to its prompting and challenge. Which is what we do in church.

Hold it. Look at it. Understand it. Practice using it. Burnish it until it shines. So that, then, it might be seen by the whole world. And by it, the whole world shall know that we are indeed Christ's followers.

Amen.