Jesus commands His disciples to love one another. This is all the more pertinent when we realise this reading is set at the last supper just after Judas has left to betray Him. It kind of takes away all of our excuses we might make about finding people difficult doesn’t it?

Judas goes off to set Jesus’ crucifixion in motion and there Jesus is, fully aware of what is happening explaining how we must love one another. Just as he would have been aware when he had knelt down to wash Judas’ feet.

When Peter first heard Jesus give this command, he was, in all likelihood, not really listening. Peter was, as we all probably know, good at jumping in with two feet. And this little part of the gospel just following Judas’ exit but pre Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s future denial. Where Peter quickly jumps in to say he would never do such a thing. But he did.

Similarly Jesus begins to make plain in this little section that He is about to enter into His suffering and death and that this bit is for Him to do alone. They shouldn’t try to follow on this difficult bit. But as we know, Peter did try following and failed miserably. Had He listened to Jesus words He shouldn’t have followed at all!

But there are longer term implications for Peter from Jesus’ words. Love one another. A ‘new’ command. ‘New’ here meaning as in a fresh and different way of doing the old act of loving. Peter would never have anticipated that this would mean he should love not just Jews but Gentiles (which is what the Acts reading is about).

As simple as the command to love one another might sometimes sound we know it is not always easy and this reading illustrates that. The implications of His words for us are massive. Christ calls us not simply to put up with one another but to actually love each other. Not just those we find easy to love or those we know but to love other members of our church and any other Christians that we encounter. He is in this situation talking about fellow believers.
He says that love is the mark of his disciples and, therefore, the church. It is to be a witness to the world. The world is to know the disciples of Jesus not by their zeal or doctrinal purity or code of living but by the love they have for one another.

Later in Galatians 5:22-23 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Against such things there is no law when Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit he begins his list of ‘fruit’ with LOVE. Love is the most important.

But love has to be lived out. And there are always difficult situations, there is always a specific person, here in front of us, rubbing us up the wrong way. Irritating. Annoying. There in a real and concrete everyday situation.

Love is the greatest of gifts. Love is a matter of action. It shows itself in a thousand different forms - in hospitality, in greeting, in not being snobbish, in not keeping a score of wrongs, in weeping with those who weep, in encouraging, in giving up your ‘rights’, in speaking out, in working together, in seeking reconciliation. It is the ‘more excellent way’, as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.
And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

A passage read at many a wedding and I often challenge the couple to replace the word ‘love’ with ‘I’ so it becomes: I am patient, I am kind etc. This reveals what a high ideal this command is. Which is why Christ describes the love required as that of being as He loves us – i.e. the perfect example.

From a human perspective, the death of Christ was a terrible thing involving unspeakable suffering; but, as our gospel passage said from the divine perspective it was the revelation of the glory of God because it showed the love of God. John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”