

If you love me, keep my commandments

*There are moments in history that shape our future for generations
and where we must answer the question anew
of who we want to be as a country.*

This is one of those moments.

The whole country has been shaken

by the horrendous attack in Golders Green (last week).

We are seeing a resurgence of terror, fuelled by Islamist extremism.

We are seeing thugs paid by foreign powers to commit criminal damage.

*All in a climate where antisemitism and bare-faced hatred
have bubbled over into the mainstream.*

*And beyond our shores, we see a fractured world –
a perfect storm of crises sweeping towards us.*

If that sounds familiar, it may be that you read the Observer,
or listened to the news last weekend.

This is the beginning of an article written by our Prime Minister.

He spoke about reshaping the nation, bringing people together,
halting the sink into division.

And just days after an election that has radically changed
the local political landscape,
wherever you sit party politically,

it's hard to argue against the need for change – radical change.

And whilst the Prime Minister goes on to argue the political imperative,
this morning, I want us to focus on the theological imperative for change
and what that might look like.

And there's guidance for this in both our readings this morning.

Both readings are essentially about the nature of God

and the nature of humankind – as we should be – in relationship with God.

In the first, from the Acts of the Apostles, we find Paul speaking to the Athenians in
front of the Aeropagus – the Judicial seat, if you like,
where the most prominent leaders met on matters of law.

He commends them on their devotion to their religion,

but then, *fairly* politely, goes on to tell them they've got it completely wrong!

What Paul is accusing them of – if that's not too strong a word – is idolatry.

Worshipping idols – human-made beings
crafted with precious metals and stones by human hands
given human-made value.

The making of gods in human image who cannot be *known*.

Paul speaks of the unseen creator God
whose hands made everything and bestowed life on every living thing
In whom we live and move and have our being.

And therefore, with whom we have a relationship,
by whom we are known and who we can know.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus, the very image of the unseen God,
God incarnate, God made flesh, speaks to his disciples
about the unseen Spirit of God that will come to them
when he himself is no longer seen – the Spirit of truth.

If you love me, he says, keep my commandments
and the Spirit of truth will come to you.

This conversation takes place in the context
of the same meal described in the previous chapter,
where Jesus takes a bowl of water and a towel and washes his disciples' feet,
a radical act of servitude and care from their leader; where he tells them

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.'

So, the political language at the moment is all around
fighting terrorism, *fighting* antisemitism, *taking* control.

There's nothing inherently wrong with this,
but what is our weapon? What do we fight *with*?

Well, based on what we have just read, it's Love. Radical Love. Holy Spirit Love.
Not simply a passive love that enjoys the feeling,
but a rushing wind, a burning fire of passion.

The Holy Spirit is a wild, untameable Spirit, generously overflowing,
transforming, urging, exciting, compelling.

Jesus makes it clear that we don't only *talk* about love,
but we *demonstrate* love, *show* love
in acts of service to one another, in and beyond our community,

that we welcome strangers,
that we build bridges between people of different faiths, nationalities, ages, abilities,
that we build relationships of mutual understanding, respect, compassion.
Keeping Jesus' commandments is not just about turning up to church every week,
it's about actively building this community of Christians,
developing caring, loving relationships,
serving one another, supporting one another –
it's why the usual coffee after the service is, in many ways,
as important as the worship
– it's where relationships start, it's about offering hospitality.
Today, we'll be supporting the Fun Run – showing hospitality at the water station.
It's about demonstrating that we are a community
that is radically different from the ways of the world;
so we build a community that people want to join
because they see something wonderful in it, something that draws them.
And then – what we do with that when we leave the building,
because that's where we can make a difference – change the world.
The *only* way to fight hatred, suspicion, prejudice, is to Love.
To show love. To act love.

Our idols are not all made out of silver and gold.
They are power and the need to cling to it, and the belief that I am right.
The language of division and hatred of belief in self.
They are still money and making more of it,
whilst great numbers still starve in a world where there should be plenty;
the accumulation and production of stuff,
depleting resources and damaging the planet on which we depend.
The identity I build up for myself with these things, false idols and fashions
which ultimately obscure the identity of the one in whose image I am made.
The one *in whom we live and move and have our being*.
And the image that is present in every single human being.

If we want to end division, we have to practice a radical kind of hospitality.
We bring down the barriers – the language of division.
We meet those who are different face to face and learn their story.
We understand what has shaped them
and why they might hold particular views,
particular understandings about the world.

We try to see each person through God's eyes – eyes of love and compassion.

The change we need cannot only be driven politically.

The change we need is deeper and cultural.

If we want to fight division and hatred, the *only* weapon we have is Love.