“I give you a new commandment,” Jesus says in today’s gospel, “that you love one another.” The context in which the reading unfolds is that of the Last Supper. Jesus has just washed the feet of the disciples and in doing so has given them and us a model of service and of love. “Having loved his own who were in the world,” John says, Jesus “loved them to the end.” The phrase “to the end” suggests not only to the end of his life, but to the outer limits of what love can be and do. In the case of Jesus that will embrace his self-giving unto death on the cross.

The final verses of the reading shift the focus from Jesus and his love for us to us and to the love, which he is encouraging us to have for one another.

Somewhat surprisingly, Jesus describes what he is saying to his disciples about love as a “new commandment”. Over the centuries, people have often asked why Jesus refers to it as a **new** commandment when in fact it is already present in the Old Testament.

What makes it new can be found in the saying of Jesus, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Referring to this text, St Augustine remarked, “The object of Jesus in loving us was to enable us to love each other.” The model and the ideal of love with which Jesus presents us is a challenging one. It is no exaggeration to say that it involves the whole of his life. St Paul suggests the depth of the love that Jesus has for us and for the world when he encourages us to “Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Both Paul and John see in Jesus both a model and a source of love.

In the course of his pubic life, Jesus directed what he was saying about love to his disciples and to their relationships with one another. After his resurrection, his words came to be applied in a special way to the small Christian communities, which were gradually being founded and built up. In that context the words of Jesus, “everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another,” took on a special meaning.

Some two hundred years after the death of Jesus, a Christian theologian and writer named Tertullian, witnessing the growth at that time of the church in North Africa, extolled the power of love to attract people. He saw the conversion of so many pagans to Christianity as the result of the way in which Christians were able to overcome all the social, ethnic, and economic differences that marked their communities. He imagined pagans who were being drawn to Christianity saying, “See how these Christians love one another.”

The love of which Jesus speaks and to which he calls us is not a sentiment or a feeling. It does not even mean that we have to like the persons we are called to love, although that obviously makes it easier. To love others in the sense that Jesus gives to the word means to care for them and to seek their good, especially the good of those who stand in most need of such love.

Although there is a certain universality to the Christian understanding of love of neighbour, it also leaves room for different forms of love - love of spouses for one another and for their children, love of friends, love of those who are relatively close to us and with whom we interact on a regular basis. In every case, love requires a certain self-forgetfulness. The more we are taken up with ourselves, with our achievements and success, our hopes and longings, the less time there is for us to be open and sensitive to others and to their needs.

St Paul in his famous hymn to love is remarkably down to earth when he describes what love of neighbour entails. “Love is patient,” he says, “love is kind; love is not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.” It is striking how much of what Paul says here about love is formulated in a negative way. His experience has taught him how easy it is for us to develop attitudes and practices that render love of others difficult and, in some cases, impossible. We must learn to discern such negative traits in ourselves and work to overcome them.

Love in the Christian sense has both a human and a divine dimension. It is a something built into our very nature as human beings. It is no exaggeration to say that we were made for love. One of the most precious things that a parent can give to a child is love. It is only when we have been loved that we become able to love.

Divine love brings a new dimension to our love. It enables us to relate all we are and do to God and to Christ and to the gift of their Spirit. Here too it is true to say that we must allow ourselves to be loved if we are ever going to be able to love.

Although love begins with the individual, it must learn to reach out beyond the individual and the family and embrace, to some degree, the broader community, especially the poor and the sick, the hungry and the lonely, victims of war and other forms of violence. Although we are limited in what we can do for others, there should be no limit to our desire to be in all our relations a person of love.