



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Easter VI (10th May) 2026

Writing at the end of the second century or the early part of the third, the author Tertullian reports that pagans of his time would say of Christians, "'Look,' they say, 'how they love one another' (for they themselves hate one another); 'and how they are ready to die for each other' (for they themselves are readier to kill each other)." His point is that some people were drawn to the Church where they believed that they would find a culture, which contrasted sharply with the callous cynicism and violence, which were prevalent in the temporal society of their day.

The author of the Epistle this morning covers a similar point, though couching it in terms of a culture turned outwards to that temporal society: when asked why you are a Christian, have your answer ready, but offer it with gentleness and courtesy; do not rise to provocations and undermine the Gospel by resorting to conduct which is incompatible with our proclamation.

The fact that Saint Peter - or whoever - thought it necessary to write these words might suggest that not everyone was as consistent in the observance of such counsel as they should have been. Likewise, Tertullian was probably describing the Church at its best. All the same, what both of them say is important and something on which we should muse as we craft the Church's mission in the years to come.

As the author of the Epistle implies, this culture of the Church is a reflexion of the Christ we seek to serve; as much, at least - if not more than projects and other instantiations of our Faith the way we routinely treat one another speaks of the Gospel, which we are called to proclaim.

Of course, it would be absurd to suggest that Christian communities are the only places in the modern day, which aspire to reciprocal courtesy. What makes the culture of the Church unusual is that these mores should, as Tertullian suggests, be underpinned by love for the people with whom we engage.

Talk of love in this connexion is not as straightforward as we might at first suppose. Within the Christian context love is a term of art: it does not have quite the meaning that people ordinarily attach to it.

Christian love is not so much emotional as intellectual in that recognises the dignity of humanity and based on that, like God, has a concern for individuals and seeks, so far as possible, to contribute to their well-being and flourishing. There is, furthermore, a self-sacrificial element to this Christian love as the author of the Epistle implies as he makes reference to the Suffering of Christ.

Of course, it is not always easy to know how to respond to this Christian love in the complexities of a world darkened by sin; and even when we get it right, sometimes our actions are invisible in the mists of frailty, which swirl around us.

Within the life of a Christian community, however, as Tertullian suggests, things can be clearer as we relate to others to whom we are bound by the bonds of *communio*. It is not that we should have a greater regard for the human dignity of our fellow Christians nor that they are more deserving of our concern and compassion. Rather, the context of a Christian community provides, as it were, a less cluttered arena where the outworking of Christian love can be more clearly seen: not least, because the response to a loving action is similarly characterised by Christian love: that is the theory.

As we craft the mission of the Church into the future, we need to careful not to overlook the importance of the Christian community itself in communicating the Gospel we are called to proclaim.