



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 10.44-48

John 15.9-17

Writing these reflections is something that brings me close to God. This year of separation has been very difficult in many respects particularly in that I have not been able to worship with you and celebrate Holy Communion. Also of course in that I cannot share fellowship as mum and have done for so many years. When I write these reflections though, I feel very close to you all. Bible study and reflection on the word of God is part of our relationship with him as is prayer.

I am very privileged to be able to share communion with mum week by week and to observe the cycle of the seasons. Easter was particularly powerful this year.

Last week we looked at Jesus' words, 'I am the true vine,' I said that it was from the second part of what is known as the Farewell Discourse – that is chapters 14-17 of John's gospel. These are the last teachings of Jesus given to the eleven disciples immediately following the Last Supper. The first part of the Farewell Discourse is concerned with Jesus' promise to his disciples that after his departure he will send the Holy Spirit, the comforter, to sustain and strengthen them. Following from his teaching on the true vine is the famous passage we have for our gospel reading this week. Jesus gives his new commandment. 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It is one of my favourite passages and it should be central to everything we do as Christians. It shows Jesus' focus is love. The words 'loved' or 'love' appear something like nine times in this short passage.

The two biblical sacraments are baptism and Holy Communion – Jesus was baptised. We too are baptised in the name of the Trinitarian God as we begin our new life in Christ. Jesus, in the accounts of the Last Supper in the synoptic gospels, gives the central instruction, 'Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me' as he gave the bread and the wine to his followers at the institution of the Eucharist. Holy Communion stands at the centre of our faith; it is our meeting with Jesus Christ in remembrance of his death and resurrection.

It follows that his other specific commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you' – and if you think about it Jesus did not give many – should be at the centre of our faith and our behaviour, enshrined and embedded there too.

These words are contained in the old Prayer Book service, still said at Spital Chapel.

'The second commandment is like it, namely this that thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'

These words are from the Ten Commandments – Jesus' words are different. Don't just love others as you love yourself but as I have loved you. Those few words carry such a wealth of meaning.

Folajimi Olubunmi-Adewole known as Jimi was one of two men who jumped into the Thames in an attempt to rescue a woman who had fallen from London Bridge on Saturday 24th April. The woman was rescued by police and coastguards as was the other man. Jimi, aged just 20, lost his life.

He did not just jump in without thought. He phoned the police. He had time to look into those terrifying waters in the dark and cold and know exactly what he was risking – yet he did so and paid the ultimate price. That is 'love your neighbour' in action. He did not know this woman any more than did the Good Samaritan who helped the man who was robbed and beaten. It was the ultimate act of humanitarianism. Who is my neighbour? Answer, any and every one.

This man gave his life – we may never have to do this but we are called to live out Jesus' new commandment. The whole passage is about love. Before Jesus gives his new commandment he talks about relationship. Love is relationship,

⁹'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.'

The relationship of love is between Jesus, his Father and the disciples; it depends on obedience. Keeping God's commandments as Jesus has done, living in Jesus' way is central. That is, not only in the way he has taught but also has lived out and will live out on Calvary. It is a relationship founded on and embedded in love.

Jesus came that we 'might have life and have it more abundantly.' Life lived with and for others in Jesus Christ is a complete life, a transformed life. Gone are the old empty ways that people used to run after and be preoccupied with; things that cannot bring real joy and often lead only to selfishness and at worst sinfulness. No, the true way to fulfilment of life and complete joy is life lived in Christ's way and in obedience to his commands and his example.

¹¹'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.'

We are called to act to make the lives of others better. This does not always mean in grand ways, for most of us it will be simple ways. It means caring, giving a smile, a thoughtful word, thinking of the feelings of the other person before we act, being sympathetic, sensitive and kind.

I remember most vividly listening to the radio as I travelled to school on the day after the death of Princess Diana. As I turned on the car radio I heard her voice she said, 'Show Kindness in another's troubles and courage in one's own.'

Each one of us has the power to make other people's lives better or worse by what we do and say. Jesus knew that and so he gave that new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' A Christian does not just believe in Jesus, they don't just talk about Jesus, to be truly Christian you have to behave as Jesus taught. 'Love one another as I have loved you,' should be lived out in the reality of our lives. If that is not the case then we are failing in our professed Christianity.

'As I have loved you' is the key here. Jesus talks of 'greater love' the love that leads a person to lay down their life for another and as the action of young Jimi showed it does not have to be for someone you know.

Jesus is saying this to his disciples because he is about to be executed. He is 'obedient unto death, even death on a cross.' Jesus goes to the cross in love, love for all humanity. His courageous and self-giving love will save humanity and restore us to new life. The commandments Jesus gives to his followers he lives out first in obedience to God.

Too many times throughout history people have taken this saying and used it out of context and for their own ends, the worst being in war. Jesus is talking about lives lived and given in love for humanity.

Jesus came in love that we 'might have life and have it more abundantly' – we likewise should live in his ways and help others lives to have a better life. So much depends on us, for better or worse life is about relationships. Jesus was the servant king, we must serve others. There is no room in Christianity for power or status seeking; that only blinds us to the truth of the message of Christ; lives must be lived in love and service as his was.

There are some stunning statements in this passage,

¹⁴'You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.'

Jesus is God, he was with the Father bringing creation into being, yet he has just knelt down and washed his disciple's feet. This is the real symbol of service to them. They then are his friends now. One mark of friendship is that you confide in your friend. One mark of power is the withholding of information from another. Jesus says you are my friends because I have shared with you the good news of the Father. His disciples in turn are to share that good news with the world.

¹⁶' You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.'

Jesus called those disciples just as he calls us to follow him; we receive the grace of God freely given. Once chosen there is a job, a commission for those first followers and for us too – 'go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.' The fruits of the Spirit are if you like the hallmarks of a life lived in Jesus Christ. I remember saying that Christianity is like a recipe Jesus gives with the ingredients and the method. Love being the central one. Leave a couple of ingredients out or refuse to follow the method and you'll get something but it won't bear any resemblance to the original. Veer away from the path of Jesus and you won't get real Christianity at all.

No, the fruits of the Spirit are life enhancing, life giving for us but also for those we share them with. Bearing fruit here also means taking out the word of God and doing the work Jesus has commissioned his followers to do in his name. It's vital to remember that our lives are representative. People will look at us as Christians and expect to see the hallmarks of Christianity. 'Christianity is caught, not taught.'

Jesus' last phrase, the 'Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name' does not mean that Christians will have an easy time of it – anything but. No it is an instruction to have faith in God's purpose and goodness. To trust in him however tough things are; to have a relationship of prayer in Jesus' name. We may not get what we want when we want it but we are in a relationship with God who will walk alongside us and never leave us, ultimately his way will prevail.

Jesus ends where he began. ¹⁷ 'I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.' There is no dodging this, no getting away from it. There is nothing sentimental in the instruction to love – often it is tough and it took Jesus to the cross but it is his legacy and his command. Love has the capacity to turn things upside down. But because love touches the depth of our being it also

makes us vulnerable. If you think about it though, those are two of the greatest characteristics of God. God, by being three in one lives in a complete and perfect harmony of love. In our capacity to love we mirror him. We are called by God to love, and be loved.

God showed his love and vulnerability by becoming a helpless child, and by dying for us. Jesus of course is the face of God that humans have seen; he is the embodiment of divine love. His was a love so strong that he; God and man, was able to forgive those who were knocking in the nails.

God's love for us is infinite, shown once at Calvary but released into the world and with us here and now in the Holy Spirit. So we can experience God's great and tender love for us and can share in relationship with him. Like any love it is a developing relationship.

The key is transformation, transformation of our lives, transformation of our church, and transformation of our communities. How? By loving- loving God, caring for other people, putting yourself in their shoes, thinking before we act or speak. It is as simple as that. If we do that true transformation will follow.

Jesus knows that only love can change the world and continue the new creation begun in him, the king of love.

Our New Testament readings for the last few weeks have been from the Acts of the Apostles. Luke shows us how these commandments of Jesus are lived out in the lives and actions of those first followers. This reading, if taken out of context as it is here, can be confusing. We need to know just what happened prior to this passage.

Peter has just seen the vision of a sail coming down containing various animals all unclean to a Jew. He hears a voice which says, 'Get up Peter. Kill and eat.' Peter is horrified and replies as any Jew would, no way, I have never eaten anything unclean. What the voice says then is earth shattering, 'What God has made clean you must not call unclean.'

We must remember that to Jews Gentiles were unclean. What God is declaring here is all are welcome in his kingdom. To Peter then if a person was to come to the Christian faith they would come through Judaism. We remember Jesus' words, 'I have sheep not of this fold.'

We have seen how the word of God has been for his chosen people, the Jews. Throughout their history God has been with his covenant people and even when they have strayed from his way he has always been faithful in his love for them. Jesus is the promised Messiah he is the culmination. Through him new life will come.

Jesus has made it quite clear that his message is initially for the Jews. But with his coming something very radical has happened. Jesus Christ is the way the truth and the life. The way to new life now is in Jesus Christ not necessarily through Judaism first. 'No one comes to the Father except through me.'

So then the words of God are for the Gentile world also and they do not have to enter the faith via Judaism, Jesus is the gate of the sheepfold.

The chapter begins with these words,

^{10.1} 'In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called.

²He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' ⁴He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶he is lodging with

Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.’⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him,⁸ and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.’

Peter was just recovering from his revelation when the men sent by Cornelius appeared and gave their message. Prompted by God Peter obeys his command and the next day accompanies the men to Caesarea with some Jewish men who were believers. What happens when they arrive at the house of Cornelius is quite amusing though it is shocking to Peter. Only God in Jesus Christ is to be worshipped.

‘Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.’²⁵ On Peter’s arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him.²⁶ But Peter made him get up, saying, ‘Stand up; I am only a mortal.’

Peter makes the situation quite clear to Cornelius.

‘You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile;’ A few days earlier this is what Peter and all Jews would have believed it was part of their upbringing, their creed. Now everything is different. ‘But God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.’²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?’

Cornelius as we have seen is a good man who is interested in the God of Israel. He tells Peter of the visit of the angel and the instruction he received. Peter has come in obedience to God’s word now Cornelius waits to hear what Peter has to tell him. Peter begins with these words,

³⁴ ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.’

This does not mean God does not have favourites in the way we understand the word though of course that it true, it means Gentile nations throughout the world are acceptable to God. They can become Christians; there is nothing unclean about them. That means everyone is equal before God. So Peter very simply tells the story of Jesus Christ. It is too long to quote here but it would be good to read it in full. The central point of course is this,

‘They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.’

Now I imagine that Peter although he knows that he is not to consider anyone unclean any longer does not expect what happens next in the passage we have as our reading today. Cornelius, his family and friends do not have time, like the Ethiopian to say, ‘What is there to prevent me from being baptised?’ No Peter is still recounting the story of Jesus. It is God who is proactive here; suddenly the Holy Spirit descends upon these Gentiles just as it did on Jesus’ first followers at Pentecost. The Jewish men with Peter are amazed.

⁴⁵ ‘The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.’

It is obvious to everyone God has set his seal on these people. Now Peter knows that Judaism is not the gateway to baptism as a new believer, Jesus Christ is and only Jesus. There are no bars to joining the Christian church

'Then Peter said, ⁴⁷'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.' There is no need for conversion to Judaism first; there is only repentance, forgiveness and belief in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. I think it is important to underline that. We have to turn to Christ, we have to turn from the old ways, we have to make a new commitment to faith and life in Jesus' way to be baptised as Christians.

It takes us right back to our gospel reading, 'Love one another as I have loved you,' you cannot pretend to be a Christian and show the love of Jesus if you practise exclusion. No one is unclean or unacceptable because of race, gender, colour or anything else. No, all that turn to Christ are welcome in his family. That is the lesson Peter learned and that is the lesson we have to learn. Care and love of all people is the key, but their responsibility as ours, is to turn from selfishness and sin and to live in the way of Jesus, it is a two way process – it is relationship, a relationship of love. God never leaves us – when times seem tough as is so well expressed in the famous poem 'Footprints' it is then that he carries us. We need never walk alone.

'By this shall all know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another.' Dave Billbrough

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