

Love One Another ...

... as I have Loved You

A sermon given on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, 5th May 2024 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster.

Acts 10:44-End; John 15:9-17

This morning's reading from Acts opens as Peter is preaching to a group of Gentiles - that is, non-Jews - in the house of Cornelius, a centurion and a Gentile himself. And while Peter is preaching, the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles there. The Jewish Christians who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. Only a couple of days earlier, Peter too, would have been astounded.

But why were any of them astounded at all, to begin with? The very earliest church was a Jewish religious movement - they worshipped in synagogues; adhered to the law, the ritual and dietary rules of the Old Testament; they considered themselves to be Jewish men and women who believed Jesus was the prophesied Messiah - so a Jewish religious movement, rather than an entirely new religion. But then debates began to emerge. Could Gentiles, non-Jews, become followers of Christ? Or did they have to become fully observant Jews first? The difficulty was that for faithful Jewish men and women, including Peter initially, they were unable to break bread with Gentiles. They couldn't even enter their homes, as according to the law Gentiles were impure, unclean, and even profane.

But then Peter, as described earlier in this chapter, receives a vision and a voice from heaven tells him, *'God has made all things clean. You must not call anything profane.'* This goes back to Genesis - all of creation, all that God has made is good and sacred; nothing that God has made can be called bad. And following this vision, God sends Peter to the house of Cornelius and upon arrival, seeing the many Gentiles assembled there, Peter says, *'You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.'*

And this really is the beginning of the church as we know it today, a community in which no one is set above another, a community that looks outward and welcomes the stranger - as St. Paul tells us in Galatians, there is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female - for you're all one in Christ Jesus.' Grace, the Holy spirit, dissolves our inherent and inherited systems, those things which human beings pride themselves on: class;

education; income; nationality; ethnicity. The various ways in which human beings set themselves apart from one another, are as nothing before God.

And this is what Peter realises: the systems that he prided himself on and believed set him above the rest of humanity; his observance of the law; his status as a Jew - is totally dissolved by grace, by the Spirit. And thus all assembled in the house of Cornelius, Jew and Gentile, are equal before God.

And it is this pride, this desire to set ourselves above others, that Jesus speaks to in our gospel reading this morning, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Within the church, there is always a danger that despite having done nothing to earn it and nothing to deserve it, we become prideful in our faith, that we view ourselves as a community set above the rest of humanity, above those outside the church. We fall into the same sin as Peter, separating creation into the clean 'us', and the profane 'everybody else.' And in doing so, faith loses all meaning - it becomes merely another means for pride rather than the means by which we love others. It becomes a false faith.

The Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, wrote, "Christianity is not a doctrine to be taught, but a life to be lived." And this isn't to say that doctrine and belief are unimportant, but that belief cannot be separated from practice and action. The call to believe in the resurrection, to have faith in Jesus Christ, is also call to practise the resurrection in our everyday lives - to give our time; service; and if we have the means, money to the poor and to those in need; to work for peace and justice; calling out cruelty and injustice when we see it; to practise forgiveness in our relationships with others. We cannot be true disciples of Christ if we believe in and worship him, but don't follow him, don't model our lives on his life.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." And this is the genius of Jesus's command. It is not another law, a set of rules, or a set of rituals, which if we follow and observe to the letter, we will know how to love God, love others, and be worthy of God's love ourselves. Instead, the commandment is love itself, to love in the same way as Jesus loved, a framework to live by.

The law in the Old Testament, the set of rules governing daily life, while good in itself, became corrupted by people's sinfulness, was misused, becoming a means of pride to set people above others. Jesus' command doesn't leave this as an option. As soon as you set yourself above another, allow pride to motivate you, you have failed to demonstrate the love of Christ, and thus failed to keep Christ's command.

Saint Augustine wrote, "Love and do what you will." If we love as Christ loved, we don't need to concern ourselves with 'this law' and 'that rule' - we need only do only live out our faith. This is

why in ordinary time, Holy Communion ends with the dismissal, 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.' - because our service to the Lord doesn't begin and end in this church building. Gathering together as a community to worship is what gives us the grace and the strength to go out into the world and to live out the love of Christ.

Reading Text

Acts 10:44-End

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 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. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:19-End

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I 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. 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. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.