

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER: MAY 15th

Acts 10:25-48; John 15:9-17

Acts 10:25-48

This magnificent story from Luke presents the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles in three classical steps. We first of all see the situation created where there is an exchange between Peter and Cornelius in which the problems are set out (23-33). Then, we find Peter spelling out the theology of what is happening in another of his speeches (34-43) and finally there is the movement of the Holy Spirit (44-48) which leads to the baptism of Cornelius and his household.

As we go through this story you can feel the tension building. Cornelius is not just wanting a private exchange with Peter. He gathers his household and by the time the apostle arrives, there is a large crowd in and around the house. And then the wonderful statement that Peter had entered the house and was *in conversation with Cornelius*. That does not sound all that exciting, but as Peter himself points out, what we have is a Jew entering into the house of a Gentile and engaging in a discussion with someone who is deemed to be unclean by the Law. How the Pharisees, the priests and the lawyers would love to have this bit of evidence! The prophet/apostle reaching out to the poor, letting the side down by this unrighteous behaviour.

But then Peter is even more outrageous in that he now declares *God has shown himself*. Peter is not just acting on his own, he is acting at the behest of God. It is not Peter who is moving in this unprecedented direction. God has declared that from this time on, there is to be no “clean” or “unclean”. Luke continues with his carefully constructed story by having Peter then ask Cornelius for his own profession of faith.

Cornelius tells his story and in it we see that God has appeared to Cornelius the Gentile and responded to his prayers. Again, a seemingly harmless comment but one with great power. We have the religious professionals putting the Messiah to death and persecuting the apostles who profess faith in his name. We have the leaders of the Jewish community rejecting the messiah and his resurrection but here we have a godly Gentile responding in faith to the movement of God. What counts here is an individual’s life with God. Cornelius is a man of prayer, who gives alms for the poor and is clearly a righteous man. That is what counts: faith.

As Peter listens to this testimony he sees just how similar are his own spiritual experiences to those of Cornelius and it is clear that what is unfolding is a new movement by God. This may be shocking, may threaten and challenge the religious status quo and impose new and frightening challenges to the faithful and the leaders of Israel, but clearly God is at work. *In truth, I am grasping that God is no respecter of appearances. Rather in every nation the one who fears God and acts righteously is acceptable to him (10:34-35).*

There is the message in a nutshell: God is no respecter of the things that we consider to be important and the legal limitations we might like to impose on his people. What God looks for is not obedience to man made laws. What God demands is that a person comes before him in an appropriate manner – as a creature, a servant, a sinner who has been saved and who acknowledges that forgiving mercy by a life of faithful living. It is not simply a matter of believing in God, the person found to be righteous by God will be living in a godly manner, doing all that God in his Son demands of him. We can put all of that down to one word: faith.

In this last missionary speech by Peter that we have on record, he sets out in a succinct manner the mission of Jesus what was to include not only Israel but all who turn to him and who accept him as Lord of all. This is a bold statement for Peter claims that God has made

Jesus Lord of all things, *judge of the living and the dead*. Jesus not only stands as judge of those who are still on earth but will also be there at the final judgment and all who die will one day appear before him to have his life weighed in the balance. For Luke, this final judgment will be conducted in the light of the life, mission and teachings of Jesus, all of which can be summed up in the commandment to “love one another”. Righteous living will be assessed according to how we have treated others and whether we are repentant.

Of course Peter will have to defend his actions when he appears at the Council of Jerusalem for the Church is not yet ready to authorize such “outrageous” behaviour. The Spirit, who is not going to be limited by a lack of courage, faith and hope on the part of the community of believers, moves over these righteous Gentiles in a way that is observable to those who are witnessing what is going on. So caught up are they by the Spirit, that Peter has the baptized. As we have seen so often in the stories from Acts up to this point, Peter, the apostle, is acting in a prophetic manner, leading the community forward in faith, even when it is reluctant to hear and obey the directions of God. He is a tough and courageous man and in the end, at the Council of Jerusalem called to sanction him and this new movement towards the Gentiles, God proves him to be righteous.

John 15:9-17:

The love that Jesus has for his disciples arises out of the love that His Father has for Him. It is one and the same divine love. It is love that binds the Son to the Father and the disciples are called upon to bind themselves together through living in this divine love. How are they to share in this same love? It is by obeying the commandments of Jesus. Those who follow Christ can know heavenly love, share in the love that flows between the Father and the Son simply by living in the way that Jesus teaches, by putting to one side personal ambitions, personal agendas and the petty things that so often clutter up the lives of men and women everywhere. They have to focus on the place of God in all that they do, think and say and model themselves on how Jesus might act in those same circumstances.

Abiding in Jesus means a life of “doing”. As Jesus spent all of his life and ministry “doing” the Father’s will, so the disciples are expected to live their lives and to carry out their ministries in the same way “doing” the will of the Father through “doing” the will of Jesus his Son. By living in this way the disciples will know true “joy” in their lives. As people of “joy” they will be bringers of “joy” to the lives of everyone they meet.

Jesus goes on to make this powerfully clear. The disciples are to love one another because they have first of all been loved by the Father who sent to them his Son. This is the reason for love being the mark of the Christian and the Christian community. As they have been loved and chosen to they are to take that love out to others. This is how all of the world will know whether or not they are followers of Jesus Christ: by their love for others. This is a magnificent but frightening presentation. Jesus has made it clear that the situation in the world has now changed and is about to change even more with his approaching death. In this new situation, what the other Gospels might call the Kingdom of God, there is only one measure of righteousness: whether or not, in all things, with all people we are men and women of love. That is the measure that will be used by Jesus when he judges us as the Lord of the living and the dead.

Jesus reminds them that they did not choose Jesus. He it was who chose them. He called them and has sent them out into the world, not to live in their own precious little world but to bear fruit – fruit that will last. They are to do this by living in the world (and that means every moment of our lives and every encounter with others in our world) as Jesus would live in the world. As he pointed out earlier (13:19-20), whoever receives them, receives the one who sent them, Jesus who is Lord.

The initiative for mission rests with Jesus who calls them but in all things it is important that the disciple turns to the Father for all that he needs to fulfil this divine mission. God will bless what happens and it is this divine participation in their mission that will make it prosper and bear lasting fruit. And, in John's characteristic way, he reminds them again that this participation grows out of their willingness to obey the commands of Jesus and the command of Jesus is that they are to love others.

The Mission of Jesus continues on in the world through the mission and ministry of the disciples. Jesus is the vine but they are the branches which will bear lasting fruit. This is why he tells them to *go and bear fruit*. It is because they are to understand themselves to be branches of the one vine and the only reason a vine has branches is so that the fruit can be produced. It does not grow on the vine itself, on the stem, but on the branches. At the same time, the branches are useless when they are cut off from the vine. They cannot bear any fruit on their own.

Jesus ends this section with a clear cut command from which there is no escaping, from which there can be no excuses: they are to *love one another*. This is the mark of discipleship and as we are about to see, this love is expressed by a dying to self, a giving up of one's own life for the sake of another. This is the only measure of a disciple and it is when the world sees the love of one disciple for another that they will gain an insight into the very life of God himself. Similarly, a failure to love is a failure of discipleship and is evidence that the disciple is no longer an authentic disciple for he is now cut off from the vine.

Conclusion:

The readings today are so timely for our modern Church and for our own lives as disciples. Luke reminds his Church that there is no room for an attitude that rules some people to be "Gentiles", outside of our love and compassion. There is no biblical mandate for excluding people on the basis of what they believe or do not believe, on account of their actions and behaviour or for any other reason. In the eyes of God there is no more "clean and unclean" and so suddenly our lives are changed as individuals and faith communities. We can no longer demonise those who do not like, those whom we feel have hurt us in some way. We are reminded that everyone, including those for whom we have little affection, are saved by the death of Jesus and the onus is on those who claim the name disciple to reach out to them in love. Life is easier if we can keep some people out of our loop of love by either ignoring them or by painting them as bad people unworthy of our love. Life becomes more complicated when we are told that our judgment will be on the basis of our lives of love for all people – not just for those we like and who agree with us, but on our love for all people, particularly those we consider to be "gentiles".

And that is precisely what John's Jesus is saying to us. The love we have to have for all people we come across in our lives is exactly the same love that the Father has for the Son and the Son has for his disciples. As we are given this love so we are called to share that love.

This may be the single most important mission initiative and evangelism programme with which we are presented in the Gospels: love one another. This is a mission programme that does not need love, does not need a whole lot of training, resources or lots of young energetic Christians to carry it out. It is not something that we can hand over to our priests and lay leaders. It is something that rests on each and every man woman and child who wishes to be considered to be a disciple of Christ.

If we become authentic lovers of all people then God will make us produce an abundance of lasting fruit and the world will know it is being fed. If we fail to love people – and there are to be no exceptions in our lives of love, no one we can deem to be unworthy of our love –

then we fail in our call to be authentic disciples and our faith communities will wither and die and eventually be cut off from the vine.

Let us pray in these final weeks leading up to Pentecost, for the gift of repentance. That we may reach out in love to those with whom we are at odds, that we be reconciled and show to the world the love the Father has for all peoples through the love that we have for one another.