

Sunday 15th May 2022
Easter 5 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 11.1-18
NT: Revelation 21.1-6
G: John 13.31-35

You might consider that today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles is God's criticism of all vegetarians and vegans. Peter had refused to kill and eat much of what was lowered down in the sheet to him in his dream. But God chastised him

"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

If you are going for a literal interpretation of this Bible story, then that may be your thinking. Vegetarians and vegans need to be told that they are wrong and need to change their ways. But you would be widely missing the point. Read on and see what God is teaching the disciples through Peter.

If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God? When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

To this point, the disciples and leaders of the new church of Christ, wrongly believed that the grace and gift of the Holy Spirit was only available to the converted Jews, that God had no consideration for the Gentiles who remained beyond the boundary of his plan of salvation. Slowly the realisation dawned for the Church leaders, God does not set up barriers, God does not exclude anyone from his mercy, God loves all his creation and makes no distinction in backgrounds, previous beliefs, or appearances.

It seems surprising to us that the disciples should think that God's gifts were exclusive. After all, Jesus during his ministry, went out of his way to include the marginalised of his day. He called tax collectors to follow him, he sat down and ate with sex workers and others deemed to be sinners by the religious authorities. Jesus made it clear that all were welcome to be with him.

Yesterday in our gardens and in the church, we had a wonderful celebration of inclusive love, the city made a stand against hatred and division, we came together as people of God, made in his image and likeness. You could even have a selfie taken in a frame which proclaimed, The Image of God.

I said that it seems surprising to us that the disciples should think that God's gifts were exclusive but sadly that is still what some Christians are continuing to think. There are those, and some were meeting in our city yesterday who believe that God loves you, but only if you are willing to change. You are required to conform. You need to be straight and preferably married. You need to own your sinfulness which might come in the shape of being gay or binary or transgender. Acknowledge your faults, refrain from being who you are and all will be well. It seems to me too that many evangelical churches are male led and that the women are better as mothers and tea on the table wives. The Church of England is also struggling to grapple with the reality of love in its many forms and continues to take a conservative, with a small c, approach to marriage.

I hope that the majority of the people who profess such mistaken beliefs do so from what they believe to be a genuine position of right. But what they fail to understand is that others hear their words and interpret them as a permission to act against those who they see to be

different, and they act with verbal and physical abuse, with a violence which has led to many gay and transgender people be attacked and even killed. We concluded our afternoon together yesterday with a vigil to remember all victims of hate crime.

This divisive interpretation of the Bible does not acknowledge the words from Revelation that following the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is a new heaven and a new earth.

Through his earthly ministry, Jesus has revealed more about the Father and his love for his creation. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, there are further revelations that all are one in Christ Jesus. As Christians, we should be inclusive not exclusive.

How arrogant will we be if we challenge God, if we stand up and say he made a mistake when he made gay people or people with a learning disability or people who are unhappy in the bodies they were born with! Why would anyone think they have the right to do such a thing?

But let's not dwell on the negative. The purpose of yesterday was to be positive, to respond to hurt with shared caring for each other, to show there is a much better way to the Father who is defined as the source of all love, that all are welcome in the family of the risen Christ, that the gift of the Holy Spirit will be denied to no-one who seeks to know God.

In his gospel, John recorded an address from Jesus to his disciples. It comes just before his passion and death and reads rather as a strategy document for the new Church. This is how things should be. In today's extract Jesus says

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Love one another as I have loved you.

No mention of making distinctions about different groups of people, no requirement to check people's sleeping arrangements, or to ask how someone defines themselves.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

Without distinction or conditions. Jesus died once for all upon the cross, the ultimate act of love.

This is the new commandment he is calling us to follow, to love as he loves.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

This is how we will show Jesus to the world, not by being divisive and self-righteous but by loving everyone without compromise. Not always an easy task but that is why we have need of the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us to follow Jesus as he has commanded us to do so.

In making human beings, God excelled himself, if he will allow me to say such a thing. He made us all in his image and likeness with a richness and diversity that only the supreme Creator could manage. Each of us, as we are, has our place in his kingdom, each of us, as we are is a meagre reflection of the overwhelming love of God, each of us, we are, is vital to the complete picture of God's creation.

If I may finish with words for you to contemplate. They come from Niall Williams in his novel, This is Happiness.

Human beings are creations more profound than human beings can fathom. That's one of the proofs of God.

The Revd Michelle Montrose