

**NT: Acts 11:1-18**

**NT: Revelation 21:1-6**

**Gp: John 13:31-35**

We might all like to think of ourselves as open-minded but whether we realise it or not, most of us carry some level of bias in our thoughts and actions. Hopefully, these are in petty matters but as we see some governments and peoples lurching to extremism, the matter becomes more serious.

The astonishing criticism of agencies that work to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion of all people especially those who traditionally have been subjected to discrimination and isolation because of their identity or disability. The bitterness of those who use the word 'woke' with such malign animosity. The closing down of borders to no longer help those who are truly in desperate need.

We have just commemorated 80 years since the end of the Second World War and we might want to remind ourselves of what the liberating armies found as they moved through Eastern Europe in places such as Auschwitz and Belsen. Not just the merciless suffering and slaughter of Jews but also those who were disabled, gay or who did not simply fit into a pure Arian world.

Humanity does not seem to want to learn the lessons from such atrocities. As I speak, a form of genocide is taking place in Gaza, Russia is attempting to bomb Ukrainian civilians into submission and politicians in this country are in danger of choosing popularity and votes over compassion and care for the world's most needy.

Discrimination is not new. At one time, we Gentiles were the disparaged people. The true God was only meant for the Jews, the chosen people. The early disciples, including Peter, believed this too until God stepped in to show otherwise. Today's reading from Acts is an illustration of God using an example well known to the Jewish people then and now, using the laws and traditions of unclean food, and turning it on its head to confirm that all people are welcome into the Kingdom of God.

The Father's love is unconditional, it makes no distinction in a person's ability or identity. The Son died once and for all peoples. The gift of the Holy Spirit is there for all who open their heart to receive God's power and wisdom. The other disciples at first criticised Peter:

*So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'*

But they came to see the hand of God at work in the salvation of all humanity as Peter told of his experience:

*And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.'*

In the reading from Revelation, we hear a description of the Kingdom of God as it will be, as we should work towards in this world now. A new heaven and a new earth when the old ways are transformed slowly bit by bit. As we are transformed slowly through the grace of God to fulfil our calling, to completely be the

person he created us to be, to move from the image of Adam, the sinful person, to the identity of Jesus Christ, the sinless perfection of all humanity.

We cannot do this alone. If we try we will just stumble and fall, become discouraged and give up. We cannot even do this together, though it is part of what we need to succeed. We need a higher power, we need the grace of the Father, the example of the Son and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We need to follow the new commandment that the risen Jesus gave us:

*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.'*

Easy to say but not easy to do. We carry with us those prejudices that I mentioned before. We also have an inbuilt need for survival, to put ourselves and our wishes and wants first. We need to work at this commandment to love.

Using an example from St Paul about running a race, remember that no athlete just gets up one morning and runs a world record, not even the likes of Usain Bolt. A great deal of training is required. Exercise to build up strength. A specialist diet to provide the power needed. The repetition of running and running until it becomes second nature. And then, eventually, you are fit to run the race.

For us Christians, the exercise is prayer. Taking time out to be still in the presence of God, to walk with him through our daily life, offering up our concerns and cares and asking for the grace to be a better person.

Our specialist diet is the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ which sustains and strengthens us in our faith so that we can grow in our belief and trust in God. We can harness the power of God to help us take on whatever is required of us as we go out from here each Sunday.

And the repetition is just that, trying and trying each day to be open to God's will, to see Christ in others, to love our neighbours as ourselves. It will take a lifetime to be fit for the race, to achieve the goal set for us but with the help of God, we will succeed and in all our efforts we will leave this world a better place than the one we came into.

We may never know, certainly in this world, what positive impact we may have had on the lives of others but God will know and will rejoice in our attempts and bless us for trying. There is a song by Beth Nielson Chapman which I recommend to you. It's called *How We Love* and it finishes with these words

*Sometimes we forget, trying to be so strong  
In this world of right and wrong  
All that matters when we're gone  
All that mattered all along  
All we have that carries on  
Is how we love.*

**Revd Michelle Montrose**