

This sermon attempted to trace the connections between the three readings set for the day: Revelation 21:1-6; Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35.

John 13:35 *By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

General election time. And I don't know about you, but I and my friends and acquaintances are already having those conversations which go something like this. "I really can't believe you intend to vote for so and so. No good at all. Hopeless candidate!" To which the response is "Well, how you can even imagine voting so and so I really do not know! Useless! It's a wasted vote." And on it goes. We take sides and slog it out. At general election time our language lapses into vivid technicolour – all of us, politicians as well. The only difference being that we are not public figures, and we are not wired up to a microphone.

All of which has an uncanny link to today's second reading - though it may not at once appear so. This passage is about the key question for the early church: should gentiles be admitted as members, or not? In Acts, Luke tells us that Peter has a vision. The vision makes clear that all the animals in this great blanket let down from heaven are fit to be eaten. Never mind that the law has, for centuries forbidden some of them and called them unfit for eating, and that Peter for a lifetime has followed that law, now God is clearly saying otherwise. So, when a gentile family ask to see Peter in order to hear about the Gospel, and then ask for baptism, Peter responds to the lesson of the vision. He baptises them, and then sits down to eat with them in celebration.

When he gets back to Jerusalem, there is a row, not, interestingly, about the baptism of gentiles, but because Peter went on to eat with them. He got too close. The 'apartness' of Jewishness had to be maintained: fine to baptise, but eating together at table was not on. In Luke's account here, it seems that Peter explains his vision and at once everyone understands and there is rejoicing all round. However, we know about all this from another source – Paul, and his account of this great problem for the early church is quite different. He tells us that he and Peter were at Antioch together. When it came to supper Paul ate with the Gentile Christians and Peter sat down at a table set apart for Jews - Peter who was supposed to have understood the implications of his vision at Joppa. Paul was shocked. He says that he "withstood Peter to the face" – for which read: there was an almighty row. It was a row that nearly split the church, rumbling on for several years until it was resolved at the council of Jerusalem. Luke writes when it is all settled. Paul tells it as it happens, and we can all recognise the human emotions involved: how easily we fall into conflict - the way we take sides, then wobble and shift position; the way we are so quick to condemn, and the way all of that can so easily go on to undermine and poison our relationships. And that is what is at issue in this set of readings.

At first sight that little passage which is our gospel, seems to be about Jesus saying “Don’t you behave like that. The mark of my disciples is that they should get on with each other. So, better behaviour than the ways of the world is expected of you.”

But Jesus does not work like that. That is not the way of the Gospel. The key to that sentence “*love one another*” lies in the word “*love*”. Jesus does not mean the feelings of love you and I might or might not have for each other. He means the love of God – the love of God which is there in every one of his disciples - in the disciples in the upper room, and in you and me now. And that is quite different. You might paraphrase it by saying, “Care for one another out of the depths of God in you, and not out of what you feel, at any one given moment.”

This is a key passage about understanding the resurrection life. The interesting thing is that it is sandwiched between two perfect examples of human weakness: before it, Judas slipping out to betray Jesus, and after it Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s betrayal. It is as if Jesus is saying, “I know about human behaviour. When things are tough you may feel weak, inconsistent, let down, angry. But look deeper. You have more resource than you imagine. Even in you the love of God is there, with more than enough strength to help you act in a different way.”

It’s the heart of everything we have to learn as Christians – learning to live, not out of our own resources, but out of the Grace of God, which is there, gifted into the middle of everything – right into the middle of our lives. Learning to live that way is part of learning what the resurrection and resurrection life is about.

If I understand it right, the apostles of Jesus discovered – through many ups and downs like that of admitting the Gentiles – that what had happened on Good Friday was that God had included us in. There in the middle of our worst behaviour, God, who can know no death, embraced us. And that act of love by God releases in us the power of creation – the ability not just to cope with some of the human problems we have, but the possibility of turning them round and making something better, maybe even something glorious of them. Slowly the disciples discovered that the barriers between people were totally false. They simply did not matter – Jew/Gentile, slave/free, women/men – and all those other pernicious barriers we put up – one of us/not one of us, liking/disliking. We can live without them. The discovery for them – for us – was not and is not instant. We have to learn to trust God’s grace in us – through prayer and bible reading and our sharing of God’s life together round the altar here. But if we do that, we change and barriers come down – slowly at first, with many a slip, but absolutely certainly.

It is what I think of as the extraordinary inner story of the New Testament. In his lifetime the disciples had known that Jesus was remarkable, but they had never quite known what to make of him. After the resurrection – bit by bit, they came to understand that it was as if he had been given into the heart of their lives, and they now had the inner capacity to act as he

did. God, through Jesus, was bringing everyone out of the usual human mess, into the splendour for which we were all designed. Following the way of Jesus, living out of his strength, they discovered the possibility of becoming the best of themselves.

And there is one last thing we have to note here. It wasn't – isn't - just us. As these small groups of people came into line with God's original plan, so, they realised, the whole of Creation would be changed too. Perhaps now we can understand how that might be. Learning to care for each other, we begin to care better for the earth. There is always a link between you and me, and our slow change for the better, and the splendour and glory of the world. That is what the author of that strange and wonderful book, Revelation, (our first reading) means when he talks about a city where relationships are right and there are no more tears; and a "*new heaven and a new earth.*" And notice that it "*comes down from heaven*" – that is to say it is gift, not something we create ourselves.

That is the core of resurrection life: learning to see life, learning to see everyone and everything as *gift* – undeserved, generous beyond measure, but there for every one of us if only we will open our eyes and see it and respond.