

Readings for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 10: 44 – 48

While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So, he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

John 15: 9 – 17

Jesus said: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.”

Reflection

Have you ever stopped to think about what makes you? What is it that makes you stand out from the crowd? Is it the way you do your hair or colour it? Is it the make-up that you put on your face? The colour you paint your fingernails or the length to which you grow them? Is it the clothes that you wear? Or is it, perhaps, a tattoo or a body piercing to your ears, nose, cheek or somewhere else? Those of us with an extrovert personality may just want to stand out from the crowd of us human beings who are made in the image of God. To do that we may behave in odd or different ways or just dress differently. In short, they just don’t want to blend into the background.

In our reading from John’s Gospel, Jesus is talking to his disciples. For them, it was always possible to blend in with those around them. The range of clothing was somewhat more restricted than it is today. The range of possible expressionism was very restricted. How then should Christians behave amongst their peers, those amongst whom they live? If those around us are chasing after money, social status, sex, power – all of them, of course, false gods – it is very easy for us to get swept along with them. Society preaches a gospel of looking after number one – that is to say, looking after ourselves on the grounds that if we don’t nobody else will – and not necessarily caring about who gets hurt in the process. Trouble is, behaving like that – blinkered to only see ourselves – leads us to forget others, to forget what is going on around us.

Jesus asked his disciples to live differently. Firstly, they aren’t to follow the trends, to be individualists to the end. On the contrary, he says “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” It is, perhaps, worth noting that the concept of receiving and living out a commandment was nothing new to the disciples. After all they were Jews brought up to obey the Ten Commandments that God had given to their ancestor Moses on Mount Sinai carved into two tablets and recorded in Exodus Chapter 20: -

²“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

³“You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third

and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹² “Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ “You shall not murder.

¹⁴ “You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ “You shall not steal.

¹⁶ “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

¹⁷ “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.”

And here was Jesus, the Son of God, giving his people, giving God’s people, a new commandment. The significance of that might pass us by as we read this passage and so we might miss the importance of Jesus’ instruction or command. When he was asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus had answered: ³⁷ “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” (Matthew 22: 37 – 39).

In giving his disciples this commandment, it could be said that he was not asking anything new of them. If all the Commandments focused on neighbour – rather than on God – could be summed up in the single commandment ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’, what was Jesus really asking his disciples to do? He was asking them to be a community that was united and marked out by love for one another. That would certainly stand out from the people they lived amongst who were worshipping multiple gods – even the Emperor – and indulging in or enjoying activities such as gladiator fights that certainly did not function on anything like ‘love one another’ but rather ‘kill or be killed’. The Ten Commandments are primarily about relationships: between God’s people and their god and within God’s people as a community. In essence, they were called to live in community with each other – in a community based on love but not of self but of each other. The early church was to be marked by its attitude to each other and those around them.

Jesus was asked about the outworking of this ‘who is my neighbour?’ In reply, he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The story is so famous that ‘being a Good Samaritan’ has entered into our everyday language for those who perform acts of random kindness to others that are totally unexpected. But this is not just a commandment like the Ten Commandments that the Israelites were given at Mount Sinai. Those commandments, handed down, as it were out of the cloud, were given in a potentially legalistic way – especially if we put too much emphasis on the ‘Thou shalt not’ phrase that is in most of them. So, Jesus went one stage further. He asked his disciples to love one another because he had first loved them. In effect, he had given them a living example of what loving others meant – he went to the cross for their sins, for our sins.

So, what does it mean for us as Jesus’ disciples to love one another? It is easy for us to look at others and see not similarity but difference – be it skin colour, the way we walk, the way we talk, the way we behave, what we believe, what our sexuality might be. Despite our differences, one thing stands true – we are all created in God’s image. However different we may be, this fact does not change and is not changed by those differences. This must, therefore, be our starting point – we are all made in God’s image. Amazingly, our differences are all a part of God’s plan for us and not some sort of corruption of nature. We shall be exploring this more in the autumn with our Living in Love & Faith course as we think about how we relate to our differences and how we respond to each other.

Secondly, God sent his Son into the world to reach out to those that society rejected – and still rejects today – and to show that he had come not to condemn but to welcome and embrace. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, came to seek the lost and ‘on his shoulder gently laid home rejoicing bring them into his Father’s loving outstretched arms. Our differences can blind us to the simple fact that God loves each and every one of us without distinction, without reservation. The cross is the ultimate example of this as nailed to it Jesus dealt with the price of our sins for each and every one of us – no exceptions. His love for us was without limit.

St Paul put it slightly differently ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

To live out a life of loving one another is not an easy option. The differences we have with each other can be really challenging and Jesus calls us to rise above the differences and irritations and to love one another – as he loved us. It is a challenge that we can only hope to meet in the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of God. We also need determination and the willingness, at times, to bite our tongues. That doesn’t mean that we have to accept unacceptable behaviour from others, but it does mean that we need to address those issues with sensitivity and love rather than antagonism and confrontation. That is not the way of the cross nor the way of Jesus. He calls us to follow his example. Will we have the courage and the resolve to meet the call to love one another unconditionally? I pray that we will.

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