



Sr Jessica for Easter 6 (2021)

Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

In a community discussion recently, we were talking about the concept of love of neighbour, and its relevance to our lives here at Mucknell: what does our love for one another entail? I think it was Sr. Sally who said something like, “it’s not mushy love”. I think we can all imagine what she meant by that: not purple prose, not slushy pop songs, not pink hearts and overpriced chocolate. There’s something faintly unreal about all those things, and for all I’m sure there are those who appreciate them – I know I have, on occasion – somehow they don’t quite match up to what the Bible has to say about love. When Jesus gives us the command to love one another I suspect he means more than just cute cuddly toys and a box of chocolates.

Our reading from Acts helps to shed some light on what he might mean; the episode we heard related today takes place in Caesarea, where Peter has been summoned by a devout yet Gentile Roman centurion following this latter being visited by an angel. It’s just before receiving this summons that Peter has his famous vision of a sheet covered in all kinds of animals descending from heaven, and hears God’s command to “kill and eat”. When Peter protests, he hears the words, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane”. It’s a huge turning point both for Peter and for the entire Jesus movement at that time, and today’s reading is, if I can mix my metaphors slightly, both the proof of the pudding and the icing on the cake. When Peter has shared the good news about Jesus’ death and resurrection with the people gathered to meet him – who are all Gentiles – the Holy Spirit falls on them, just as it had fallen on so many at Pentecost and shortly after. As Peter says, “these people...have received the Holy Spirit just as we have”. For him, the only possible response is to baptise them, and so welcome them into the family of faith.

These baptisms mark a dramatic extension of the work of God in the world, and I wonder what was going through Peter’s head when he went to bed that evening? The last couple of days had been an awful lot to take in, although perhaps Jesus’ death and resurrection had given him some practice in having an awful lot to take in.

In the events at Joppa and Caesarea, we along with Peter see something of the effusive, overflowing nature of God’s grace that simply washes over the boundaries we create or inherit. This then gives us a clue to the nature of God’s love, a love that loves to break down barriers. This was hard for the early church to accept at first, and it caused discussion and debate, but when it came down to it, they could not deny what had actually taken place: the Holy Spirit had fallen on these people, and so they were in.

Or perhaps the real point here is that ‘in’ and ‘out’ are becoming unnecessary as ideas. After all, when everyone’s ‘in’, or potentially ‘in’, then there is no ‘out’. Someone’s previous status is irrelevant: they are God’s children now.

This does not mean that we will automatically find living alongside those previous outsiders easy. It occurred to me reflecting on these events that there would have been a huge cultural gulf between the early Jewish believers, bought up on the words of the Law and the Prophets, and the early Gentile believers, who probably knew little or nothing of these texts. In the same way there are those today who with their difference disturb us: they disturb our neat categories, they disturb our understanding of what it means to be a follower of God, they disturb our own sense of security, ultimately. It would be so much easier, surely, to live with people who were just like me.

Easier, perhaps. Better, probably not.

A while ago I started reading a book called “Green Sisters”, about the environmental work of various religious sisters and nuns in the United States. One idea which the author saw as being common to all the groups and communities she visited and contacted was the idea of cultivating diversity and biodiversity. This has a literal meaning, in that many people trying to practice sustainable living, and particularly sustainable agriculture, recognise that growing a diverse range of plants helps to both create and strengthen entire ecosystems – we see this at work in our own estate. This might not be quite as neat and tidy and controllable as a huge field of wheat, or a plantation of beech trees in perfect straight lines, but I think I’d prefer our eclectic and diverse estate any day. The revelation for me in this was transferring this thinking to the church, both the church at large, and our own community. Our diversity makes us stronger, somehow, and more resilient. It’s good for our ‘ecosystem’. There’s a beauty in that diversity that wouldn’t be there in a Community of twelve Jessicas, or twelve Stuarts, or even twelve Berties (*one of our cats*), God rest his soul. Diversity makes us more resilient as a group, it shows us other possibilities and ways we might grow, and it reminds us that we do not have unique ownership of the things of God.

There is still a gap, though, between accepting and even appreciating the diversity that God seems to revel in, and actually living in real, genuine love for those around us. How to bridge that gap? The answer, as so often, is Jesus, and his words to his disciples, “abide in my love.”

We don’t have to love from our own power or our own emotions, which is probably a good thing! As we abide in Jesus’ love, as we allow it to fill us and refill us, we can let it flow out from us to others. All love is essentially relational; in inviting us to abide in his love, Jesus is not trying to teach us a theory, but he is inviting us into a love that he himself shares with his Father: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved

you... If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.”

This link between love and keeping the commandments of God is a tricky one. There's a temptation to perhaps ask for a tick list – if I can check off all the items/actions, then I have loved. This is fairly clearly not how love works, and yet we can't deny that our actions and our attitudes matter – there is a vast difference between an effusive and warm welcome and a chilly, business like one, for all that they're both technically welcomes.

The challenge to love genuinely, with all our heart, mind, body and soul, is, well, a challenge. Whence the importance of that abiding. The more we can experience, rest in, understand God's immense love for us, and the more we can start to see the world through God's eyes of love, the freer we will become to get up off our backsides and lavish this love on others, in thought, word and deed.

God's love is huge, powerful, overwhelming: like standing under a waterfall. There is enough of it, and more than enough. The sheer energy of God's love can – should – take our breath away, and yet so often all we – all I – give to others is a trickle from an old tap by comparison. Part of me looks at myself here, and thinks, how dare you? How dare you be so mean with what God has lavished upon you? And so here we today, back under the waterfall once again, seeking to experience and understand and abide in the love that sustains the universe, in the hope that we might in turn be able to pour out some measure of it to those around us. Amen.