

Year C Easter 5 John 13 31 to 35 and Acts 11 1 to 18

The readings for today set up an interesting dynamic for us. In the Gospel story, we are back in the upper room with Jesus and the disciples as they share their last supper together but in Acts, Jesus has died and has been resurrected and now Peter is centre stage without the physical presence of Jesus. The early church, that we read about in Luke's Book of the Acts of the Apostles, is a fascinating account of how the first disciples got on with Jesus's mission in his absence.

Let's reacquaint ourselves with a fundamental understanding that the early church understood because it is a crucial understanding that many Christians today do not have. The Jewish people had long held the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath – a day, not of the absence of work, but a time for active participation in the sacredness and fulness of divine peace as the fruit of all work, the crowning of all time. It was the day when God had acknowledged that the good creation he had created was complete and could carry on functioning in its goodness. But this good world, acknowledged on the seventh day "is at the same time the world of sin and revolt against God, and its time is the time of [human] exile and alienation from God. And, therefore, the seventh day points beyond itself toward a *new* Lord's Day – the day of salvation and redemption, of God's triumph over all his enemies" including death. (Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 63). In Jewish society, then, emerges the idea of a new day – a day beyond the limits and frustrations of the seventh day, the time of this broken world. This new day would be the *eighth* day – the first day of the new time of God's kingdom.

Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday – the first day of week – but, because he was given new life, a resurrection body that would never die again, this was clearly life

beyond the brokenness of the world that leads to death. His followers began to call Sunday the eighth day – the beginning of new life and of the new time of God's kingdom on earth. This is the day of the Church – the day when we break bread together on the first day of the week, remembering Christ's death and resurrection in this broken world but, at the same time, it is the eighth day when we celebrate God's kingdom in our midst as we feast together at the banquet table of God in the fullness of God's kingdom on earth.

This is the exciting and joy-filled reality that the early church lived into – and that the present church must recover. God's kingdom, the new age, *is* here despite the fact that the broken age still continues around us. The new age *is* what we are living and all that we do and say matters in this new age. Like the early church, we must know deep in our hearts that, as we live our new lives in God's kingdom, more and more of the brokenness of the old age will fall away and the fullness of God's kingdom will be more and more plainly revealed to all who choose to live in it with us. Jesus gave to us the blueprint our words and deeds are to follow. In Acts, Luke shows us what it looks like as the church lives the blueprint Jesus provided...and what it looks like is change – big change...risky change.

Today we hear Jesus sum up his blueprint for life in the words of the commandment he gives to his disciples: "...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.

We are to take the love of God that we are given and share that in the world. It is important to remember that Jesus speaks this commandment to his disciples at the last supper, before he dies for them. We remember this because Jesus, himself,

shows us this love in action at that final supper. He shows us what this love is meant to look like when he gets on his knees in front of each one of his disciples and washes their feet. In a scandalous, shameful move, he abandons society's rules of operation and serves his disciples. Even more important to notice is that he serves *each one* of his disciples. Jesus washes the feet of Judas – the one who will betray him to the Jewish authorities. Jesus washes the feet of Peter – the one who will deny being his disciple, deny even knowing him. God's love breaks down the barriers put into place by the limiting and judgemental thoughts and ways of human society. God's love is radically inclusive. The church has grappled with this inclusivity ever since. We witness the church grappling with this inclusivity in Peter's story.

Peter is given a vision. Three times he is shown a variety of creatures that Jewish people are not allowed to eat or they will be considered unclean. Three times Peter insists that he has never violated the food laws and never will. A voice declares to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10:15). Right on the heels of this vision, Peter is summoned to the house of a gentile – Cornelius, a centurion – and, having been urged by the Spirit, Peter goes. Cornelius and his entire household, hear and accept the good news that Jesus has opened the kingdom of God for all who believe. They are baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Great, right? More people added to the growing multitude of Christ's body.

Well, Peter is summoned before the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem and they ask him, "What on earth were you thinking – baptizing gentiles and then staying in the same house with them, eating the same food?" The fact that gentiles had been gifted the Holy Spirit – and therefore a place in God's kingdom – was astonishing enough for these Jerusalem church leaders. But it was simply "a bridge too far" that a Jewish person would stay in their house and share food with them. For the

Israelites, their purity laws reinforced their identity, a people set apart to serve and honour God, honour God's laws, and receive deliverance from the brokenness of the world around them. The laws ordered the world and their daily lives.

In going against the established laws of Israel, Peter was re-ordering his worldview, changing his identity – who he was as one of God's chosen people – and he was changing the role he served on God's behalf for the rest of the world. If the other leaders accepted what he had done – that he had baptized gentiles, witnessed them receiving the Holy Spirit, had lived with these gentiles, had eaten with these gentiles – then, they too would be re-ordering their worldview and changing their identity and role as people of God in the world.

But change they most certainly did. We witness an astounding change of hearts and minds, aided and guided by the Holy Spirit. These leaders realize that the laws they had followed for many generations were hindering the reconciling purpose of God and they had the courage to change – to be different from what had always gone before. "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life," they proclaim with awe and wonder. That proclamation of *theirs* allows *us* to make a proclamation of our own. With awe and wonder, we see church leaders give themselves over to the working of God's purpose despite the fact that this means they will be thinking and acting contrary to the way of thinking and acting they had, for so many years, believed to be the "right" way. The gentiles were given the repentance that leads to life but so were the church leaders. Repentance is a turning around – a complete change of heart and mind back into alignment with God's heart and mind.

What an amazing transformation. But this transformation is still incomplete. Over the centuries, the church – both individually and together – has sometimes worked against the radical inclusivity that moves us forward into the fulfillment of God's reconciling purpose. We create laws that exclude. In the time of the early church this included such laws as 'those who eat meat sacrificed to idols cannot be a part of our assembly'. In more modern times, we have forbidden divorced women to share the bread and wine; we have not allowed women to be ordained; we have said only a man and a woman were permitted to marry, and so on. The Church then grapples with these rules that limit inclusivity and place the decision of entry into God's kingdom into human hands. Each time the Church decides in favour of radical inclusivity, there are always individuals who do not agree and who do not change.

The inclusivity of Jesus' love command – to love as God loves us – is extremely difficult. When we're hurt, we often lash out rather than forgive; we gossip about our neighbours rather than show care and generosity. In many ways, we all fall short of the glory of God and so too, therefore, does the church. Repentance is a journey. Transformation is an ongoing process. Along with Peter and the early church leaders, we are called to continuously grapple with the limits and divisions placed on God's kingdom by human hands and, strengthened and guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are challenged to have the courage to change, to be different, to reject societal norms whenever necessary in order to embrace the radical inclusivity of God's kingdom. We are asked to show the amazing love of God – the kind of love that washes the feet of betrayers. We must continually take the time to ask ourselves if we are doing this. When the world looks at us, may they know we are Christ's disciples by our love.