

Reflection Sunday 15th May 2022

John 13: 31-35 and Acts 11: 1-18

It seems odd that whilst still celebrating Easter, we find ourselves back in the Upper Room, as Jesus shares this last meal before the crucifixion. The compilers of the Lectionary often confuse me, but telling this story from John's Gospel reminds us of the great love God has for his children, and how much we owe him in terms of loyalty and obedience.

In the narrative leading to these few verses, Jesus has predicted that he will be betrayed, and Judas has left the room and is on his way to fulfil that prophecy. Jesus knows that there is no going back – the die is cast. Knowing that he is running out of time to prepare his disciples Jesus begins to talk, to take one last chance to explain to them some of the things that they really should have grasped by now. But whenever one of the disciples speaks in the verses that follow today's reading, it shows us that they still don't understand what Jesus has been trying to teach them over the past three years.

When faced with passages in the Bible that I struggle to understand, and today's could count among them, I take heart from the fact that the disciples struggled too, even though they had Jesus right there in front of them explaining things. We shouldn't forget either, that it's good to be challenged, to be in a place where we have to think hard about what it is that Jesus is teaching. And as Steve reminded us at Marwood last week, John doesn't give us a straightforward chronological account of Jesus's life like the other Gospels. There is always a specific purpose in what John says and how he says it. Our job is to work out what point he is trying to make and what it means for how we live our lives.

We have two related themes in John's Gospel today. First of all, now that Judas has gone about his business, and the cross is inescapable,

Jesus speaks of glorification. To John, the cross brings all of God's saving work together. Jesus's self-sacrifice brings honour to God and is the point at which God is seen in Christ and Christ is seen in God. To glorify means to bestow honour, and praise. Jesus's death on the cross did this for himself and for God. Second, Jesus talks about love, the new commandment that he gives to his disciples. The themes are connected because what is revealed in the cross is the love of God in Christ. In the cross we see that love is the whole nature of God in his dealings with us.

The commandment to love is not exactly new. It is implicit in the 10 Commandments. For example, to have no other god is to love God; honour your father and mother is to love them. Most of the Old Testament law is designed to make Israel a loving community, that treats everyone with justice and care. But in John's Gospel the connection is made explicit and unavoidable. In Jesus we see the nature of God, and are called to show others that same nature. Just as Israel was designed to be a community that showed the nature of its God, so Jesus's followers are called to be a community from which the love of God, God's very nature, shines out.

This love that we are called to show to others is the same love that Jesus has shown to us, his followers. We are to reflect back or outwards the love that we have received and, in doing so, we will be reflecting the loving nature of God whom we believe in. We were created in God's image, and restore his image in ourselves by making ourselves like the Son. In that way we show the world around us the love of the Father and the Son.

This is not as easy as it sounds. We know that as weak and broken human beings we are incapable of showing this same love we receive. But we need to remember that this commandment was given to

disciples who didn't seem to understand a word Jesus was saying, and who went on to betray him. We also need to remember that Jesus knew and knows the kind of people he has chosen, then and now. They/we are ordinary, and fallible. We don't always understand and we often get things wrong, but Jesus knows that. But still, to these people, to us, Jesus entrusted and continues to entrust himself and his message. They are worthy because they are loved. We are worthy because we are loved. That is only qualification for the great task we are given.

I just want to say a few words about the Our Old Testament reading today which is the story of God's instruction to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. In the story of Abraham's willingness to do so, and in Peter's attempt to explain why he is admitting Gentiles to fellowship, we see people struggling to understand and show the love of God.

Abraham has learned two very important things that most of us never learn in a lifetime; that God comes first, beyond anything else; and that however much we think we love our family or our friends, God loves them more. Abraham knows that God is to be trusted (he gave him and Sarah a son in their great old age), even when he cannot understand what God is doing. And he trusts God because God is trusting him. God is making Abraham a part of his great purpose of salvation for the world, just as later he did the same with Peter, making him the rock on which his church would be built. Both men were close enough to God to know that you cannot bargain about salvation. You cannot say, 'Yes please, I'll have the salvation, but I won't give anything in return.'

Abraham knew what it was to experience the presence of God, and Peter too, has learned enough about God to recognise the signs of his presence, however unlikely and unpredicted. And so he becomes the means whereby God's salvation comes to Cornelius and his household.

Abraham and Peter knew and trusted God enough to be able to follow where he led, however difficult that path looked to be.

What might be hard for us to grasp is that not only does God love us but he trusts us too. He has trusted us; he continues to trust us to spread the good news of his kingdom wherever he has placed us and in whatever role he has called us to. He trusted Peter even after his great failure at the time of the crucifixion. We may believe ourselves to be unworthy of the trust he places in us and we very well may be, but he trusts us anyway. Jesus left us with these instructions. The first were the two new commandments “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this:

“Love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no commandment greater than these.’ (Mark 12: 30-31). The second instruction was, ‘Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 28:19).

Jesus trusts us to do as he commanded. Knowing that we are loved and trusted by God is the beginning of being able to follow his instructions. We do not have to conjure up ourselves this love he wants us to show, because it is given to us. As Christians we know that God is love, and we know it, not because we are better at loving than anyone else, but because we know that God has loved us and trusted us, even before we were either lovely or trustworthy.

God has trusted us with this great work. We can do it only through the power of the Holy Spirit, and that power is given to us when we learn to put our trust in God. We do that by getting to know him and meeting with him through his word and through worship.