

Easter 5C. 2nd May, 2010
Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35
Outside the Circle

Some years ago, I found myself particularly struggling with how to be civil to someone that I found aggravating and downright difficult. I took the problem to my spiritual director. Rather sanctimoniously I said to her, "I suppose God has placed me near to this person so that I can help her". My very wise spiritual companion looked straight through me, and responded, "The question is more one of - what gift is God giving to you in this person? What might you learn from her?" Well, that was a necessary deflation of my pious ego. And with that I discovered how easy it is to set ourselves up as the centre of our worlds; how easy it is to label ourselves as the insiders and others as outsiders. I've needed to come back to this wise person's advice often.

The tiny, emerging church – the fellowship of Jesus-followers –in the first decades after Jesus' death, was confronted by this, too. Where my issue was around personal relationship, for that emerging church, the issue was about what the institution of the church was going to look like. Yet, clearly the personal and the institutional merge as I, we, they look deeply into how we regard others- or, if we're honest about our responses: how we regard those we label as "the other". The ones who are different to us. Is there a place for all, and how is that done?

The story we heard from the Acts of the Apostles is astonishing and pivotal for the Jesus-followers of that time and place. In that embryonic early church, Peter's vision and his subsequent actions and conclusions were staggering. Up until then, this emerging movement of Christ-

followers was still pretty much a group within traditional Judaism. By and large, that's how they viewed themselves. Despite Jesus' parting command to take his message to "all nations" –to all the world outside the Jewish nation – for those few decades after Jesus' ascension, the Jesus followers were still enclaves within Judaism. There was still a very definite boundary line between Jew and Gentile. Jews were God's chosen people, in special covenant with him. Gentiles were outsiders, heathen, uncircumcised, not gathered under God's saving umbrella. Even in that early Jesus movement, Jews and Gentiles did not mix together, let alone share meals together. This was the Judaic law, and also a matter of religious and communal identity.

So Peter was copping a fair deal of flack from his counterparts in Jerusalem. He'd been instrumental in the conversion of Gentiles in the outlying territories of Caesarea and Lydda. He'd eaten and consorted with Cornelius and other Gentiles. And that had been because he'd seen a vision in which God invited him to eat the flesh of those animals which in Jewish law were forbidden and considered unclean and profane. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane". And it had become clear that God's Spirit told him there was to be no distinction between Jew and Gentile. If the God of all creation did not consider Cornelius and the Gentiles as impure or unclean, then Peter realised

neither could he: "who was I that I could hinder God" Peter said. . Now with some serious discussion in Jerusalem, Gentiles – outsiders - were now to be seen as included in salvation.

Surely this is one of great moments of the Spirit's work in the early Church – the revelation, the confirmation that God's inclusive love spreads beyond what has been considered acceptable. That God's welcome extends to the "other". This became the great stepping-stone to the new order that Jesus had proclaimed, that would overturn the old established orders of religious power and authority. "See, I am making all things new", we heard from our Revelation reading this morning. It was a huge moment in the birth of the Church. God's salvation –"the repentance that leads to life" gathers in even those that the institutions of religion thought were beyond salvation. That early church council in Jerusalem rejoiced and praised God for this revelation.

Yet, as I've pondered over these texts this week, I've been aware of a lurking grief. The core of this I can discern. The gap between the vision of the new church, and the reality of today, is so great. When we take a serious and discerning look around us at the world and at the Church, we don't look very much the new Jerusalem, the bride of Christ. We don't look very much like the early church who were able to stretch beyond their traditions to welcome the outsiders. We don't always look like we love one another in the same way that Jesus loved us. The "we" I'm talking about is the Church with capital "C"; it's not a specific finger pointed at us, here. But do listen for what God might be saying to us as the church of the Ascension. Our Anglican Communion is splitting itself apart over these very issues of inclusion/exclusion, and over whose interpretation of the Bible is the right way. I'm not altogether sure as others look upon us as the Church, that they see the love of Christ; that they see a kind of love and regard for each other that is compelling and attractive.

To read today's lesson from the Acts of the apostles must surely confront us all, over who it is that we spurn as unclean, contaminated and far from God. What boundaries have we- individually or as parish or wider Church – put in place that exclude others or shut them off from the love that God has commanded we extend to all others? What behaviours are evident that show welcome and love? Not just the welcoming friendliness on a Sunday morning, but a real including of others –especially newcomers – into our lives and established friendship circles. Go further than chatting to people after church- invite them home for a meal or cuppa.

At the heart of Jesus' message and ministry –his good news - was the generosity of God whose goodness reached out to all, including the marginalised and downright wicked. Even in our rejection of him, Christ loved us, died for us, embraces and forgives us. His love extends towards the "insiders" and the "outsiders".

What does this love and inclusion and generosity look like? After Jesus washed his disciples feet, before he faced his betrayal and death, he said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." It's actually a big call. Well,

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more than a big call – he gave it as a commandment. It's aimed at those who call themselves Christian, and it's about how we – in the church – should treat each other. If we follow Jesus' example of love, others around us will take note that there is something different and compelling about how we treat each other. Whilst our Gospel today is directed in-house, we all know that elsewhere Jesus calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves – regardless of who our neighbour is, regardless of their beliefs, race, sexuality and lovability. And we find- as we have today with this tremendous story from Acts, that Jesus' love is to extend institutionally beyond what was held to be in-house.

This loving is harder than it might seem. It includes and goes beyond the generous way we care for each other in this place here. This love is sacrificial- it doesn't keep us in our comfort zones; it's forever prying at our complacency, calling us to open our minds and hearts. It puts in front of us people who are different or "other"; people we mightn't otherwise want to care about, let alone love as Christ does, and serve as Christ does. It asks us to receive from people we may prefer not to receive from. It calls for forgiveness, where we've been hurt, where we might rather stay aloof, distant, unforgiving. It asks us to lay down our judging of others, and to be open to seeing people and circumstances through God's eyes. It calls us to see others as gifts to us from God, and to learn from them.

To finish, with the poem by 19th century poet Edwin Markham which is on the front page of the pewsheet:

**" He drew a circle that shut me out -
Rebel, heretic, thing to flout;
But love and I had the wit to win
We drew a circle that took him in."**

Let's not just be circle drawers, with boundaries that define in and out – let's be boundary breakers. Let's invite people into our lives; let's allow God to fix our eyes and hearts to see the gift he is giving us in them, and welcome all people as Christ does.

In the silence of reflection after this sermon, take up two challenges:

- find the blessing in that person you're inclined to label as difficult, different or "the other", the outsider; and
- commit yourself to doing something that extends Christ's love outside your usual circles. And do it today.

Amen.