

EASTER 6A 17-05-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Acts 17.22-31; Psalm 66.7-19; John 14.15-21

Acts 17.22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

John 14.15-21

‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

Today is IDAHOBIT day- I’ll bet you didn’t know that! What is it?

It is the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Interphobia & Transphobia.

On May 17 1990, homosexuality ceased being classified as a disease or health problem by the World Health Organization. Thirty years later, while a lot has changed, there is still much to be done, here in Australia and internationally. We join in the celebrations of IDAHOBIT this year by focusing on the inclusion and welcoming of LGBTIQ+ people made in the image of God by our parishes, schools and agencies.

On this day, people all over the world will stand in solidarity with their LGBTI+ friends, family, colleagues and neighbours to tell them that they are loved, and that they are not alone.

At this point you may have some questions, such as- what do all those letters mean? LGBTIQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual and many other terms (such as non-binary and pansexual)- it is an evolving acronym.

You might also be asking why I’m talking about this during a sermon.

I strongly believe that the church must be inclusive, inviting and accepting people of all kinds, just as Jesus did. That means we welcome people of any background, ethnicity, or sexual identity- recognising that every person is made in the image of God and is of equal value to God.

This is a subject that affects everyone personally. Like gender, but unlike all other aspects of being an Inclusive Church, sexuality is part of all our lives. Your experience of your own sexuality may have been uncomplicated and happy. But for many people this is an area where they have been hurt or disappointed or unhappy.

This is a statement from the Chair of the Anglican Social Responsibilities Commission, Ian Carter AM:

"Celebrating the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia is an important opportunity for the church to further its mission of justice to all people, young and older, made in the Image of God. The systemic marginalization and discrimination against LGBTIQA+ people within and outside the church shows our failings in love, theology and mission. As Commissions within a Diocese that affirms God's love and welcome to all people, regardless of sexuality, gender or gender history, the SRC is committed to exploring ways of extending inclusion to all people."

Some people in the Christian church have in recent years been vocal in their opposition to marriage equality, and have fought to have the right to discriminate against LGBTI people. They have been so loud in their opposition that you could be forgiven for concluding that ALL Christians are anti-gay; but that is not true.

In the Gospels, Jesus had nothing much to say about human sexuality; but he did have a great deal to say about loving your neighbour, caring for the poor and the sick, and forgiving one another.

In today's gospel, we hear the continuation of Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to all who love him, so that we would not be left as orphans but included in the eternal family of the Trinity.

Jesus tells us that if we love him we will keep his commandments; and what are they? To love one another as he has loved us.

When St Paul went to Athens, he didn't like seeing all the statues of the Greek gods that were all around the city. He argued with the people- Jews and Greeks- and tried to convince them that gods made by human hands are not gods at all.

When he gave a public speech, he began by acknowledging that the people of Athens were a religious bunch, judging by the statues and altars everywhere. Then he cleverly spoke of an altar to an unknown god that he had seen, declaring that he knew who the unknown god was- the God who made heaven and earth and everything in it.

Paul told the Athenians that we are all children of God; but when he started to speak about resurrection they lost interest, although some people did come to believe.

Paul seems to have been a complex character, who perhaps was not an easy man to know. Paula Gooder in her book 'Phoebe' describes Paul as a man 'driven by the mission given to him by God', who had no time for relationships.

In his novel 'Damascus', Christos Tsiolkas strongly implies that Paul wrestled with his sexuality all his life, and Bishop John Spong speculated many years ago that perhaps Paul was gay- causing great controversy.

There is no way we can know the truth of this and really- does it matter? Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul, met Jesus and became the Apostle to the Gentiles, spreading the Good News of God's love far across the ancient world. That is what matters.

So today we acknowledge IDAHOBIT, as we acknowledge and repent of the hurt that has been done by the church to people whose sexual identity is really none of our business. We recognise that God's word in the Bible has been misused, taken out of context, twisted and used against some of God's children- and we are sorry.

Let us promise that we will always try to do better as we grow in our understanding of the radical, inclusive love of Jesus.

Let us pray.

Loving Spirit, teach us compassion to embrace the gifts you give. In our differences, teach us to love fully and radically all of your children, as their true and whole selves. Lead us with courage to be advocates for people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions, just as you sent your advocate through the Holy Spirit. Amen.