

EASTER 5C 15-05-2022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Acts 11.1-18; Ps 148; Revelation 21.1-6; John 13.31-35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you 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.'

I would like to thank the writers of the Lectionary- if I knew who they were; but it is probably more appropriate to give thanks to God (it usually is). The Bible readings set for today are breathtakingly relevant- so I will try to explain why.

The story we heard in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles is an incredibly important story for you and me, because without it we would not be here; Christianity would probably have remained a Jewish sect that might have died out after a few years.

Peter had this strange dream, which he realised was God telling him that the rules were changing. As an observant Jew he would never eat 'unclean' food- because the Book of Leviticus said which foods were ok and which were off limits. In his dream he was told those rules no longer applied because EVERYTHING God has created is clean and good. Hold that thought.

Just to make sure he got the point he had the same vision three times. Peter was asked to visit a Gentile named Cornelius- a Roman centurion, but a nice one, and the Spirit told Peter to go. He told Cornelius all about Jesus, and suddenly all the people listening were filled with the Spirit- just as had happened to the apostles at Pentecost. Peter baptised them- which was a radical thing to do; up until then the believers had all been Jewish.

When Peter went back to Jerusalem the Jewish believers criticised him for eating with 'uncircumcised men'- Gentiles; so Peter explained what had happened, and they understood that God was giving the gift of the Holy Spirit to people outside of the Jewish nation.

This was a huge game-changer for the early Christian community. They had all been brought up to obey the Law of Moses; to eat only approved food; to marry within the Jewish community; and to have as little contact as possible with unclean, non-Jewish people. Now they were realising that the Good News was not just for them but for everyone.

We heard Jesus giving a new commandment to Peter and the others: to love one another. Jesus said this three times, stressing the importance of his command- to love one another, as he has loved us.

We are here more than two thousand years later because Peter, Paul, and many others overcame their prejudice and anxiety, stepping out of their comfort-zones and sharing the gospel with people they would previously have shunned and rejected. They took Jesus at his word and learned to love those who they once would have despised.

So why are these scriptures so relevant for today?

This past week has seen the gathering of the Eighteenth General Synod of the Anglican Church in Australia. Every diocese in the country sends representatives; the number of representatives is calculated according to the number of ordained clergy in the Diocese. This means it is possible to increase the number of representatives from a diocese if you ordain a whole stack of people- youth leaders, assistant clergy etc. And this is what the Sydney diocese has done. As the largest and wealthiest diocese in the country they already hold a great deal of power.

For quite some years Sydney Diocese has been led by men who hold to a particular strand of evangelicalism; one that has become increasingly strident in their denunciation of anyone who disagrees with their stance. They will not allow women to hold leadership positions or to have authority over men, so our Archbishop Kay is not recognised or respected and would not be permitted to celebrate the Eucharist in Sydney. The same would apply, I imagine, in other dioceses with evangelical leadership, such as the Diocese of the North-West.

If you read the document about General Synod I recently circulated, asking for prayer, you will know about GAFCON- the so-called Global Anglican Future Conference. This organisation is considering forming its own non-geographical 'diocese' for disaffected Anglicans who object to whatever it is they consider wrong with non-GAFCON adherents.

The Archbishop of Sydney, Kanishka Raffel, who was once a parish priest in this diocese and is now a board member of GAFCON Australia, put forward a motion to General Synod which was a statement about marriage, designed to prevent the blessing of same-sex marriages. That motion failed- but only by the votes of two bishops. Another motion about human sexuality and chastity was accepted.

Now, following the General Synod elections, it seems that all the elected and most of the appointed positions in the decision-making parts of the Anglican Church of Australia from here on will be filled by GAFCON-aligned people. The institutional deck is now fully stacked.

This highly organised group has firm ideas about who is worthy to be called a Christian and even firmer ideas about who may or may not be ordained. It seems to me that they seek to return to the days when people were either in or out, clean or unclean, accepted or rejected. I wonder what they would make of someone like Peter, coming along and breaking all those rules?

It took the early church a long time to understand how to be the church and to work out what it meant for people who were Jewish or of other religions to be Christians. Peter and his contemporaries needed to move into a whole new world of inclusion and acceptance.

In 2022 we are faced with people who want to wind back the radical inclusiveness of the gospel, to achieve some kind of mythical purity they call traditional orthodoxy. In reality this movement aims to exclude from ministry any person who is not a cisgender, heterosexual, preferably married man.

Where does this leave people in committed same-sex relationships, trans people, anyone in the LGBTQI+ community, people who are divorced- or women? Many people who identify as other than straight have walked away from the church already because they have been judged, hurt or rejected- or they rightly fear they will be.

What did Jesus command us to do? To love one another. While I am your Rector I will keep working and praying that we will all live that commandment and practise loving, welcoming, acceptance of all people: straight, gay, married, single, black, brown, pink, young, old, wealthy, hard-up- Every. Single. Person. It is more important than ever that this is truly a safe place where everyone can worship God without fear. It is vital that we support our Archbishop. I believe God wants us to be an affirming, inclusive, loving community, sharing the good news of God's love in word and action.

God, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of all things, will refresh and nurture us as we continue to learn what following Jesus means.