

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon – 5th Sunday of Easter

15th May 2022

Eglise Protestante Unie, Manosque

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Year C: Acts 11.1-18; Revelation 21.1-6; John 13.31-35

I wonder if you have ever felt wronged by someone and have hated them because of what they did. I wonder if you have gone on feeling wronged for a long time. It's the most human of responses. We can do it for years, even decades. Yet the Gospel holds out to us the possibility of another way of being.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus has shared the Last Supper with his disciples, and Judas has just left the upper room to betray him. This marks the beginning of Jesus's Passion. There is an urgency to his words as he tries to make the others understand, before he dies, the things he wants them to remember most. There are two themes, which are closely related. The first is glory, which also means revelation. It is a theme which the Fourth Gospel makes particularly its own, focusing as it does on the cross as the moment of the most profound revelation of who Jesus is. The second theme is love, the new commandment Jesus gives to his disciples.

The two themes, of glory and love, are related because what is revealed in the cross is the love of God in Christ. In the cross we are shown that love is the very nature of God, and that this is how we experience God in action. Jesus's followers are called to be a community in which the love of God, God's very

nature, is to be visible. We were created in the image of God and are invited, through God's grace, to allow that image to be restored in us by following the example of Christ's selfless, radical love.

At first sight, this might seem difficult. Even in our most optimistic moments we are painfully aware of how often we fail to act with love. We are utterly hopeless at it. But we can draw comfort from the knowledge that, when Jesus came to build the kingdom of heaven on earth, he didn't choose perfect people. He chose twelve followers with widely differing personalities, argumentative, slow in the uptake, petty, conflicted, sometimes devious, in the end treacherous. A group of complex, fallible people all too like us. Yet he entrusted his message to them. They were not worthy of it, and neither are we. Yet it was given to them, and given to us now, quite simply because we are loved.

Learning that we are loved and trusted by God is how we begin to be able to comply with Jesus's new commandment to his followers. If we, with all our flaws, are lovable, then we will find that others are too. Followers of Christ are those who know that God is love and that they are loved by God, even when they do not feel lovable. The Christian faith has been summed up by one commentator in three short sentences: 'God is. God is love. God loves us.' God is. God is love. God loves us.

Once we understand this, our vision of what the world might become starts to look more like the passage we heard from the climax of the Revelation of St John, so often read at funerals, in which we are assured that the love of God is broader and deeper than anything we can imagine, and that the creation is moving towards a vision of perfection and fulfilment that is achingly beautiful:

‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea [that image of chaos in the ancient world] was no more. ... And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new ... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” ’

That is what we are promised. The new creation, where words run out and we are left with a vision of the beauty and wonder of the divine - the God who is, the God who is love, and the God who loves us.

And how do we respond? Well, Peter shows us an example, in the story of his encounter with the Gentile family of Cornelius. The effect on Peter of his vision, followed immediately by his encounter with a Gentile family who receive the Holy Spirit, is that he becomes convinced that the Gospel of love is for the whole world, not just the people of Israel, and that one consequence is that the Gospel is to supersede the ancient Jewish food laws. (Mark’s Gospel attributes a similar understanding about the food laws to Jesus himself: ‘Thus he declared all foods clean’ (Mark 7.19).) Peter accepts the trajectory of Christ’s radical love and moves into its slipstream, even when it appears to take him in unexpected directions. Through the time he has spent with Jesus, Peter has learned enough about God to recognise the signs of his presence. And so Peter becomes the means whereby God’s salvation comes to Cornelius and his household – and, through this (along with the work which Paul is doing elsewhere in the Mediterranean), to the entire Gentile world and hence to us.

The story of Cornelius and his family is a beautiful one, full of the energy and surprise that infuse the stories of the early Church. All the food laws in Leviticus swept aside in a revelation of the radical nature of Christ’s exhortation that we

are to love one another. That's why it is also a significant passage from the point of view of the debates that have gone on throughout the Church's history about who is, and is not, included fully in its welcome. Is the trajectory of Peter's vision to stop at those with different dietary arrangements? Or is it a vision that speaks into other debates? Might the story of Peter's welcome to people who until then had been regarded as beyond acceptance in the Christian community, a story of inclusion despite the tradition of the elders, offer us any clues about how we might respond in Christian love to the issues of our time – most obviously, as the *Living in Love and Faith* conversations continue, how the church should resolve its thirty year debate over the welcome that it gives to people of LGBTI+ identity? We are, in this respect, still an Acts 11 Church, still learning how to live with one another and with God.

'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you... By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

And what of Judas? I began this sermon by wondering if you have ever felt wronged by someone and have hated them because of it, noting that the Gospel holds out to us the possibility of another way of being. Jesus's followers are not simply called to love others in the way that they loved themselves. They are asked to love others as Jesus had loved them. And his Gospel demands of us that we love not just our friends but also our enemies. It is hard, sometimes very hard, but it is worth the effort and the journey that it involves, for it can release us to live more freely in the end. So perhaps I may end by sharing with you two apocryphal stories about Judas, which tell us something of the nature of the love to which we are called, offering us encouragement as we discern how to live out Christ's new commandment in our own lives and context.

The first story is about Jesus. As the heavenly banquet is about to begin, the disciples are seated at the table in happy anticipation of what is to come. But Jesus is standing away from them, by the door. They wait, and wait, until finally Peter can bear it no more, goes across to Jesus and says: 'Come on, everyone's waiting, it's time to start the banquet. Come and sit down with us.' Jesus replies: 'We can't start yet. I'm waiting for Judas.'

The second story is about Jesus's mother. Late in the afternoon on Good Friday, as the disciples are coming to terms with what has happened, it occurs to them that they should be offering comfort to Mary, for she has suffered more than all of them as a result of the terrible events of that day. So they go in search of her, but she is nowhere to be found. In the end they track her down, in the place they were least expecting. For Mary has gone to comfort the mother of Judas.

'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Amen.