

Sunday 9th May 2004,  
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Readings:

Acts 11: 1-8

Psalm 148

Revelation 21: 1-6

John 13: 31-35

In our gospel story today, there seem to be four parts.

The words about God being "GLORIFIED" in the Son of Man "at Once" which we understand is speaking about Jesus' impending death and in the setting with Judas having gone out 'into the night' appears to now be close.

Jesus speaks therefore about his going away when he says "I am with you only a little longer" and "where I am going you cannot come."

Then there is the giving of the "New Commandment" which is about Love for one another.

And finally Jesus tells them that the way to measure their willingness to be his disciples is by their love for one another.

The mention of the NEW commandment prompts the asking of the question — What is the OLD commandment?

OR

Is it just that the situation requires a new commandment — to LOVE in the midst of tension, betrayal, antagonism and death.

We do not find out what Jesus means by love in detailed words — not here, — but he has not long

before acted out the meaning of LOVE, in washing the feet of the disciples — which symbolized

BAPTISM — the willingness to be cleansed by Jesus,

SERVICE — the willingness to bring the cleansing, healing love of Jesus to those around — beginning with each other!

In this setting, with Judas having made his move, and the difficulties and tensions increasing all around, discipleship begins with his followers' care and support for one another.

But what about the world around?

Surely the ministry of Jesus' followers cannot even begin to touch the world around unless they begin:

to love one another  
to offer mutual support and care  
to begin to operate on the same wavelength!

and we find an early example of differences of opinion among the believers in the reading from Acts 11. — The believers in Jerusalem become concerned that Peter (who of course had been with Jesus in that upper room at the washing of the feet.)

The Jerusalem Christians had become concerned over Jewish rules and taboos. — Peter had been mixing with non-Jews AND eating with them and believing Jesus message to be essentially for Jews. (The People of God) they objected. (verses 1-3)

And so Peter recounts his story and his experience:

the vision of four footed animals and beasts of prey.

how God tells him to "kill and eat".

how Peter objected to this.

then the voice from heaven saying:  
"What God has made clean, you must not call profane,"  
3 times! The repetition confirms it!

and so he is forced to conclude that NO PERSON is unclean to God.

he reports on his visit to the home of Cornelius

how he presented the message of salvation — God's love in Christ.

how God's Holy Spirit came upon them.

and so he baptised them.

We find in this story the fact that the action of God's Spirit is NOT dependent on baptism — Instead God's Spirit is active as these people openly respond to God's message and so baptism follows.

From Acts we learn that the only predictable thing about the activity of God's Holy Spirit is UNPREDICTABLE.

As Peter explains these events to the Jerusalem believers their criticisms are silenced and they praise God saying

"Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

They had written off these Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

They had written off these Gentiles as beyond God's reach and beyond God's mercy — only to find out how wrong they were!

How often do we write people off? — I hope never!

Even our enemy — we are not to discard. What does this say about attitudes in the case of Iraqi prisoners humiliated by their guards.

So often God prods and pokes us reminding us NOT to get so bogged down — so stuck in our comfort zone that we fail to recognize God's Holy Spirit at work around us.

## FIRST

Two things stand out — The gospel reminds us that at the heart of the life of the church it is absolutely necessary to have love for one another — NOT just tolerating! \*NB It is important that we work out what this means because we will be ineffective if we do not. Note that we still have a long way to go with our brothers and sisters in some other churches!

The reading from Acts points out that we can never afford to be so clicky (CLICKY!) and comfortable together that we fail to respond to God's call to a wider world. (And as I say that I am aware that our St Philip's Day Dinner did not attract many of our new families and students — nor did it attract some of the older members!)

The reading from Revelation speaks of all things being made new! If we think about it, this has begun with Christ in his Resurrection — it also anticipates — looks forward to, the life of the People of God breaking into the world around — and also to God's final and complete "making new".

The point of today's reading is that we need to recognize the transition from the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of Jesus via the activity of the Holy Spirit in the believers TODAY.

I have been talking this week to some of the senior members of St Philip's who are finding illness and the limitation of ageing very frustrating and difficult. — How do we adequately express the love of Christ to them? On the other hand, we have been richly blessed to have young families and children in our midst. On this Mother's Day I remember the stresses and strains of parenthood without the support of my own family. — How can we practically express the Love of Christ to them?

Then there are those of us in the middle????

Which is not where the sermon ended. I should have transcribed the powerful ending.

And there was the story that Rob read out of the Lenten Studies. The man had come along to a study group. When asked why he had come, he said it was because he was lonely. "Jesus is your friend", he was told. "Yes," he replied, "But Jesus doesn't play golf!"