

On Our Being the Glory of God

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Easter, Year C, 19 May 2019
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Acts 11: 1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21: 1-6; John 13: 31-35

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Regardless of the outcome, an Australian Federal election is a wonderful thing. Our country decides its future in peace, as it always has, with a vote not a war. Divisions exist, certainly, and thanks to the Murdoch press and those who buy into its antagonistic world view, America's culture wars are starting to break out here. Serious divisions are also being stoked in Britain of course, and in Europe. But by and large we Australians remain very well-disposed to each other, as we see in the good-natured queues at our polling stations on election day as we tuck into our democracy sausage.

A lot of credit for this goes to the widening cultural influence of Christian faith. From constitutional monarchy and the rule of law to Enlightenment tolerance to social justice to today's emphasis on equality, we see the Western current of compassion and solidarity

that was born in the Church and started to take over the Roman Empire. Jesus' message about Christians loving one another in today's Gospel has penetrated deep into the heart of Western civilization—not perfectly, to be sure, but genuinely.

Jesus' Gospel message in John today follows on the heels of his washing the disciples' feet at the last supper, in a theatrical display of where true greatness is to be found: in mutual respect; in the renunciation of one-upmanship and rivalry. What's more, today's Gospel passage follows immediately from the departure of Judas, set on his mission of betrayal. It's against this horizon that Jesus declares the impending glorification of God, referring of course to the events of his own trial and passion and death that are now in train. This is no rallying cry for vengeful warriors to get their blood up, though neither is it for the faint-hearted. Instead, Jesus' non-violent confrontation of evil with love issues in a new kind of triumph, in a win that requires no losers. Jesus goes non-violently to the cross but, in so doing—to borrow a phrase from Paul Keating this past week—he drives a stake through a dark political heart. He's declaring a different approach to power and influence, and of course his resurrection is in the air: his vindication by God, along with all he stood for. And friends, this glorification of God in Jesus Christ puts the false gods on notice, with their national and political and economic abuse of power. Christ's victory includes establishing a

counter witness in the world—which is why belief in the Church is part of the creed!

Friends, this counter-witness is prefigured in the Old Testament, among God's first people Israel, as we see in today's psalm. Here, in a beautiful picture of praise in heaven and praise on earth, in which all created things join, the honour of giving expression to this cosmic praise is given to Israel. And our gathering in worship, too, echoes with the same healing, restorative music of a reconciled cosmos—so, yes, our hymns are *that* good!

Now, friends, this music echoes in our Revelations reading this morning, too. Revelations isn't a book for numerically obsessive wierdos and religious nutters. Rather, it's a multimedia celebration of God's victory in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, over all the forces of history that destroy and diminish human beings. The heavenly city is revealed to us as a vast, spacious, perfectly ordered, beautiful and fitting home for the great diversity of humanity to dwell in peace with God, beyond the poisonous dysfunction of sin that dominates human history. It's a reality beyond violence, and all the mourning and crying that it unleashes; a reality in which every tear is wiped away.

Our Revelations reading shows us a heavenly vision but it's our Acts reading today that spells out its actual arrival on Earth. Here we have a wonderful picture of Church leaders discussing where the Holy Spirit has been leading the Church, and ratifying that direction. I refer to what was the gay marriage issue of the day, the inclusion of non-Jewish people in the newborn Church (which of course had initially been a sect within Judaism). But by then the Church was going global, and viral, with some questioning the rightness of including the impure, the uncircumcised, those whose lives were not marked by all the orthodox disciplines of the Jewish law: the dress, the diet, the sabbath observance, the other cultural markers of a distinctive group.

Here we find a model of peacefully, lovingly and practically working through a problem to a place of Godly discernment. Peter shares his experience of a great event. God himself had commanded him in a dream or a vision to regard the gentiles differently, and to acknowledge God's openness to them. Peter wasn't just a one man band, though. He brought his six witnesses with him, so that shared testimony was part of the mix, and he claimed his own authority while also seeking to win over the Church leaders in Jerusalem. The outcome was momentous, and eirenic, and respectful, and our presence here today is a direct consequence of it, in a world where the vast majority of Christians are no longer Jewish.

Here in Acts we see the love in action that Jesus commends to his uncertain disciples in today's Gospel. The old is passing away, as Revelations reminds us, and in this whole vast drama—cosmic, historical and personal—we see God glorified in Jesus Christ. It's not the glory that nations and parties and individuals typically try to win by power and rivalry and violence, because in Jesus Christ this old way of doing the world is passing away. Instead, a community of Christians comes to inhabit this new world through the simple expedient of loving one another in Jesus' name. And, as a consequence of Christians taking this seriously, Western culture as a whole has been transformed—not perfected, of course, but transformed, with markers of the heavenly city to be found in the earthly city, as St Augustine acknowledged.

Friends, it may seem a small thing to be a loving congregation, but you'd be surprised how many conflict-ridden Anglican parishes can't even manage that. But if we Christians can't manage to live in love together, on the model of Jesus' own witness, refusing rivalry and violence in favour of love and mutual respect, than what hope is there for the wider world?

Now, let me end on a political note: friends, the freedom Christians have to overcome the mean spirit of the old human order is the only

religious freedom that's should matter to Australian Christians—not the so-called religious freedom that's nothing more than the right to express bigoted and self-righteous opinions. That's not religious freedom, it's pseudo-religious non-freedom. It's nothing like the religion celebrated in our readings today, or in our Eucharist, or in the loving fellowship of this very special parish. Lots of people think that they glorify God by insisting on being right and despising those who are wrong. Jesus tells his anxious disciples today that they don't have to reassure themselves in that old, tried and true manner. They just have to learn to love one another in their fellowship together, then wait and see what happens.

The Lord be with you...