

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 9th May 2021
The sixth Sunday of Easter

Collect

Risen Christ,
by the lakeside you renewed your call to your disciples:
help your Church to obey your command
and draw the nations to the fire of your love,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

Acts 10:44-end

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

John 15:7-17

Jesus said: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.'

Sermon

If you want a cracking good story in the Bible, you could do worse than reading the Acts of the Apostles. It is written by the same author as the gospel of Luke, and as such is the second half of a narrative which begins with the life of Jesus and then covers the early church. For Luke, everything that happens is the work of the Holy Spirit. We know that Luke was a great storyteller – it is only in his gospel that we find those most familiar of parables, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. He also had a particular heart for those on the margins of society. Acts of the Apostles is a sweeping account of the early church, beginning with Peter in particular, and increasingly focusing on Saul, who was to become Paul after his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Acts of the Apostles is an almost breathless account of how the Holy Spirit moved in the early church. It is probably important that we have Paul's letters to remind us that it was not always a bed of roses – and indeed Acts itself speaks both of persecution and imprisonment. Yet what stands out is the energy of those early believers; their zeal in sharing the good news; and the palpable excitement of new people coming to faith.

Throughout Acts we see barriers being broken. Peter has a dream which convinces him that food laws no longer need to be followed, and it was decided at the Council of Jerusalem that circumcision was not necessary to followers of the Way – effectively continuing the work of Jesus in bringing the faith to gentile and Jew alike. And in this morning's short reading, we are given the image of Peter speaking and as people listen, they are filled with the Holy Spirit, Jew and gentile alike. It's a beautiful picture of people's assumptions being overturned, as they see the work of the Holy Spirit and realise that baptism cannot be denied to those who have clearly received the Spirit anyway.

It's a story that reminds me to look very carefully at the world, without preconceptions. We often say that mission is about finding out what God is doing in the world and joining in. What this story reminds us is that God might be working in the most unlikely places. We need to look carefully and be prepared to find God working where we least expect it. And if we are in any doubt about what we are looking for, it is the gospel reading that starts to help us out, because it speaks of the love shown between those who know God. A love which finds one of its most important expressions in friendship.

I wonder whether there are ways that the last year has changed our understanding of friendship. It has certainly made me aware of how much I value the opportunity to meet up with my friends. It's not that I have lost friends during lockdown, but rather that it just hasn't been possible to find anything quite the same as meeting up for a conversation. I've also discovered how resilient friendship is – that where there is a desire to maintain contact, it is always possible one way or another. There is also remarkable creativity in the human desire to keep in touch – mastering technology, or taking exercise together, whatever the weather.

Perhaps the advances in technology, and especially social media, had already led us to think more deeply about friendship. When as a child we moved from Scotland to England, the only way to keep in touch with my school friends was writing letters. As the years have progressed, we can not only email one another, but can keep in touch instantly. It isn't uncommon to see people walking along the street, speaking to someone using video technology.

Over twenty years ago I remember a website called Friends Reunited becoming briefly popular, enabling us to get back in contact with people we had been at school or university with. Even at the time I was aware that, for me, it was a bit of a misnomer – I had maintained contact with those people who were friends, and where contact had been lost, it was because there wasn't really a friendship. Friends Reunited has long since been overtaken by Facebook. Those of us who use Facebook may have different views about the kind of friendships we have with our Facebook friends, but there is little doubt that many people cherish online friendships as well as face to face ones.

There is little doubt either that Jesus places a high value on friendship. Here, in the farewell discourses of John's gospel, as he speaks to eleven of his disciples after the Last Supper, the quality that he emphasises is friendship. He refers to the disciples as his friends, and he describes the quality of love between friends – a love that makes us prepared to lay down our lives for one another. While such a claim may make us gasp just a little, those of us who have experienced true friendship surely recognise its deep value.

So, if we consider both of this morning's readings together, we might begin to recognise that where we see true and loving friendship, that is where God is likely to be at work. Only sometimes we might have to look carefully in order to fully understand the signs of God's presence.

I have just read a novel by Matt Haig called *The Midnight Library*. The premise of the book is a little far-fetched. The main character, Nora, is a thirty five year old woman who has become so unhappy with life that she tries to take her own life. As a result she enters the Midnight Library, a space between life and death, where she can try out different versions of her life, which would have been the result of making different decisions. And so she tries out being a professional swimmer and lead singer of a successful band as well as a series of more conventional options like working in an animal rescue centre and marrying a surgeon.

In the end Nora realises that she doesn't want to die, and while she would have had the chance to stay in any of the other lives she tried, she returns to her own life. One of the most moving discoveries she makes as she tries out different lives is that the life she has lived, unexciting though she might have thought it, has actually made a real difference to other people. She discovers that if she had not been giving piano lessons to a teenage boy, he would have turned to a life of crime. Likewise it was her willingness to look in on a neighbour that prevented him from having to move into a care home. She also realises that, while she could step into a life in which she has a happy marriage, it feels as though there is something missing, because she hasn't been a part of building the relationship.

Nora discovers what Jesus taught his disciples and they shared throughout their ministry. That it is our relationships with others that matter the most – and especially the love we have for others. And that our love for one another will always bear fruit.

Amen