

Sunday Sermon Notes – 6th Sunday of Easter – 17th May 2020

From Rev'd Jilleen Chamber

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

So near and yet so far. Tantalisingly it seems as though we can almost taste the end of the lock-down restrictions but it is still a way off. And as the restrictions are eased, we still have to remember keep our distance. Very hard. It is sometimes too easy to forget and slip into old habits. Although up to 10 people can gather now, the diocese is being very cautious and is not permitting public worship services. And it is expected to be some time before we will be able to hold Communion services.

I was reading an Internet blog this morning from a Pastor in the United States and life is much more fraught there than it is here. She was lamenting how different ministry is now and I understand completely where she is coming from. It is difficult not being able to meet with your church family; to celebrate the milestones of wedding anniversaries and special birthdays; to sing and worship together as the body of Christ; to hug someone who is sorrowing; and to celebrate the Eucharist (Communion) together.

For a sacramental church like ours, the hardest thing is the restrictions around sharing Communion. In the taking of the Communion we are reminded of Jesus' giving himself for us –

'This is my body given for you: this is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you'.

When we take the bread and the wine, it becomes physically part of us and we are reminded of Jesus' abiding presence with us and in us. "I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you." (John 14: 20) In this difficult and ever changing world, the Eucharist is a reminder of the wondrous intimate relationship Jesus offers us.

Our gospel reading from John 14: 15-21 is part of Jesus' farewell speech on the eve of his crucifixion. And a continuation of last week's reading about the promise of a home prepared for us in the Father's house and an abiding relationship with God the Father. In verse 15, Jesus calls us to show our love for him by keeping his commandment. What commandment is he referring to?

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." (John 13: 34) Jesus repeats the command in John 15: 12 and extend it in the next verse (v 13), "No one had greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends".

We hear this command to love one another so often that it can go over our heads and we do not think through its implications. And we often confuse it with the two great commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength: and your neighbour as yourself. These two commandments stem from the Ten Commandments. What Jesus is calling us to is even more demanding. It is loving one another, JUST AS I have loved you. A very tall order indeed!

This is more than ethics or justice; more than wishing someone well; more than going out of our way for someone – though it involves all of these. It is a way of life that accepts, loves and serves the other person no matter who they are, or what they are. Even if we find them infuriating and they get under our skin.

1 John 4: 20 reminds us, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." We are all made in the image and likeness of God.

It is easy to love those who are agreeable to us but much harder to love the unlovable. Jesus loved us when we were unlovable and laid down his life for us.

On Friday night, I watched the Australian film, "The Dressmaker". It is a thought provoking movie about the inhabitants of a very small Australian country town – their abuse of power, self-interest, victim blaming, and lack of empathy for anyone less fortunate than themselves was breathtakingly evident. And yes, the heroine does get her revenge. I found myself asking, what if Tilly had been shown even an ounce of love and acceptance? How different that town would have been if they had followed the command to love instead of using and abusing one another?

We have heard the phrase, “love makes the world go round’. But love is much more than something that greases the wheels and makes the world more palatable. It is the essence of life. The Bible tells us that God is love and it also tells us that we are all made in the image of God. We are created to be loving creatures.

Even though we know we are called to love one another just as Jesus love us, we still find it incredibly hard – and lets admit it, impossible to do if we rely on our own strength. Jesus promises that the Father will send us another advocate (parakletos), also translated as councillor, a helper who comes along beside to assist us. Notice that Jesus says, another advocate. Jesus himself is our advocate and he does not leave us orphaned. He is the one who is in us and we in him. He comes to us to walk beside us, carry us, and strengthen us – and he promises that we will know his presence abiding with us.

The Holy Spirit whom the Father sends to us in Jesus’ name is also an advocate. What is the difference? So often, we view the work of the Holy Spirit as the one who gives us something – the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5: 22-23) and the showy gifts of the Spirit (Ephesians 4: 11-12) and (1st Corinthians 12: 7-11). In John 14: 26 we learn that the Advocate “will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you”. The Holy Spirit is our teacher, the one who brings Jesus’ words to our remembrance, and the one who empowers us and enables us to live the command to “love one another just as I have loved you”.

When we allow the Holy Spirit to work in and through our lives, we will begin to see a difference in our relationships. Yes, it will still be hard to love those who are different from us, the unlovable, forgive the unforgiveable, hard to love the person who has hurt us, who has neglected us, or used us. What we need to do is to be willing. To want to live out the commandment to love others and then to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us. And often it takes a lot of deep Holy Spirit surgery in our lives to remove old deep seated scars and hurts. Gradually our perspective will change and our life will change as we more and more reflect the love of Jesus to others (and to ourselves).

Don’t forget, we have Jesus and Holy Spirit on our side and working in our lives; we are not alone and we are not orphans. God the Father loves us so much that Jesus came to be one of us and demonstrate the power and wonder of God’s love for us. A love that does not want us to remain imprisoned by our prejudices, hurts and fears but desires to release us into the newness of an abundant and loving life.

And our hymn for this Sunday:

Hallelujah! Sing to Jesus, his the sceptre, his the throne;
hallelujah! His the triumph, his the victory alone;
hark the songs of peaceful Zion thunder like a mighty flood:
‘Jesus out of every nation has redeemed us by his blood.’

Hallelujah! Not as orphans, are we left in sorrow now;
hallelujah! He is near us, faith believes, nor questions how;
though the cloud from sight received him when the forty days were o’er,
shall our hearts forget his promise, ‘I am with you evermore’?

Blessing:

Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good;
render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the faint hearted; support the weak; help the afflicted;
give honour to all; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;
and the blessing God almighty, the Father, our Creator, the Son, our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.