

Today as we come to the fifth Sunday of Easter the readings from the lectionary asks us to consider what it means to be the people of God who know and have experienced the risen Christ. They ask us to consider - What does faith look like? How is our faith expressed – how do we share Christ’s love? At one level these are the question of our faith every day of our lives, but on this Sunday we are focused.

When I was reading some of the commentaries about the links between the reading from Acts as Peter recounts his experience with the gentiles and of the gospel reading, I came across a quote from Martin Luther King which is often used to link the two readings together.

He said that the story of the church is like a great extended family that receives a tremendous bequest: they receive an inheritance of a wonderful, beautiful, spacious, luxurious home to share. There is only one stipulation. All must live in it together.

King hits the nail on the head in so many ways. Our faith is a fantastic gift, it is a gift which is tremendous and transformation to our lives. But it is not an individual gift, it is the ultimate gift of love, it is a gift that must be shared, and one that requires us to live with each other.

I don’t know about you, but for me this is at times one of the most challenging parts of the Christian faith is being associated with other Christians! Over the past week this has been very vivid in my mind for several reasons. Firstly, at the beginning of the week I had friends visiting from Australia – old friends who I have known for a long time. One of them and I used to go to Mass together on a Saturday evening in Sydney over twenty years ago. Now, because of the behaviour of the church and many Christians in Australia he can no longer abide the church – and for good reason. A combination of bigotry, failure to address abuse and failure to apologise has seen many lose their faith in God because of the behaviour of the Australian church.

In sharp contrast to this, on Wednesday and Thursday I was helping run a training program for clergy from the London Diocese who will be receiving Deacons in July. There were about 40 of us at a conference centre in Broxborough. It was quite a diverse group, and we only had 24hours to cover quite a lot of material. I was really encouraged at how well we worked together, there was one point however as the conversation moved to a more controversial issue I found myself wondering – how could another Christian believe that!

Then from Thursday till yesterday lunchtime, I was helping lead a retreat for our second year curates – only a small group of 7 people. Living together in this way for 3 days is very much like an intense version of the King quote – what a wonderful gift to have space to pray, and talk and reflect –and the last two days were like that – such an amazing gift of sharing, and working together, even on tough topics.

Often when I am away with other priests, I find myself wondering if I really should be one (Am I proper)! This is often based on fear, but also about how others see me or themselves. I think the older I get the more I realise we are defined by our

behaviour, actions and love; and not by the assumptions of others. Though as we all know, this can be a challenge at times.

It was this feeling of how others interpret actions, in fact which motivated the believers in Jerusalem to question Peter about what he was doing eating with the gentiles. The situation is almost humorous – Peter has just had an experience from God which breaks down all the barriers between all peoples – possibly the most defining moment of the early church – and what is the first thing the Leaders in Jerusalem say? “So you ate a meal together with Gentiles?” The indictment is clear. They were concerned with making sure that Peter was acting as a proper Jew, maintaining his identity as one of God’s holy people. God has just broken down common and unchallenged ethnically and socially based evaluations of humanity, and the “leaders” in Jerusalem are worried that Peter ate in the home of a Gentile. Peter makes the point – we have been given the gift of faith and it is for everyone and we all must share it together – whether that makes us uncomfortable or not!

Peter’s witness makes public his personal experience and his experience of others’ faith. Sharing experience in this case transforms and results in the shared glorification of God. At its root, the good news is not a universalized theological truth to be believed, but an experience of God that draws us into corporate and shared confession of God. It is what we are called to do also – to share our experiences of faith which brings glory to God. And for Peter, like us, is living out what he heard Jesus say at the Last Supper – which takes us back to our reading from the gospel today.

Today’s gospel is the same as the one which is read every maundy Thursday and it is a central teaching of our faith. It takes place in the passion narrative, just after Judas has left the room to go and betray Jesus. Jesus knows this, and it is into the context that Jesus starts to talk about how he will be glorified. It must have been quite a strange experience for the disciples. But Jesus wants to prepare his disciples, and the heart of his message is that he wants them to love.

The new commandment in this text -- to love one another -- is arguably one of the more famous statements in the bible (verses 34-35). Even those who are not active participants in the church know this commandment or ones similar to it. But is it new? Hardly. Loving one another is part of Jewish tradition, is present in the Greco-Roman world around them, and is seen in other religious traditions as well.

Loving those with whom we agree or are partial to is the easy part. Loving the rest of the people we come in contact with is a much harder proposition. But this will not be news to any of us really. It is a part of the human condition to love and to want to be loved. Reality is ... it’s easier to love those who are more loving and lovable. Easier to love those who love us, or are similar to us, or think as we do!

For Jesus, love did not mean a sweet sentimental feeling. It meant action. It meant actively loving -- putting one’s love into real world activities. This new commandment comes as part of a farewell address by Jesus to his followers. And he

does this with a sense of tenderness and mercy. He is aware that his time is over but still He commands the disciples to love one another, but he also reminds them that they will continue to feel his presence despite the fact that he will not be with them. They will exhibit their discipleship by doing what he commands: by loving one another as he loved them. This is not just about love – this is about justice. It is about loving those who it is hard to love, about responding to those who society tells us are unclean – look where Jesus acts of loving led him – and it is within this context which he gives the commandment to love! Jesus is reminding the disciples that they will be known to others by their acts of loving (verse 35). We also are called to love others as a mark of our own discipleship.

The way Jesus talks about loving each other is a precursor of the spread of Christianity. As he loved and that love spread within his inner circle, so too will love spread after he is gone when love is done in his name. This was the love that Peter was showing to the Gentiles and it was this love that confronted the leaders in Jerusalem – because at times this is uncomfortable and messy love. And worse than that – it is hard work.

Our Mission Action Plan says we seek to ‘confidently share the love of Christ’. We do aspire to do this in many ways; but the challenge is always are we sharing Christ’s love as we should? Are we working from that love, or do other things motivate our actions? Also at the heart of this question is are we willing to also receive love and to accept .

The retreat leader over the last two days used a lot of George Herbert’s poems, and it reminded me of a series of poems he wrote about the nature of love and God.

Love III I think sums up much of the theological challenge of today’s readings, and I think of the questions we too might bring about how we engage with this question.

*Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lacked anything.*

*"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here":
 Love said, "You shall be he."
"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on thee."
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 "Who made the eyes but I?"*

"Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"
"My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.

Amen