

Sermon for Sunday 5 May – The Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Acts 10.44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5.1-6; John 15.9-17

As we gather today during the Easter season, in your name, Lord, we pray that you will fill our hearts, our minds, and our souls. Transform us, Lord, and make us more like you through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Please be seated.

Well, it's been a few years since I stood in this pulpit and preached, and some of you here will remember me. Things have changed. I had been on a different pathway after I left here, and I had been a rector elsewhere. Then there was a certain time where I became a certain age, and so I had given up or retired from being a rector. But when Christ calls us as priests, we don't actually just then give up; we are expected to be priests to the end of our days. So Simon and Graham, I think we all know that. But God has for all of us something as we travel through our Christian faith. Today, the sixth Sunday for us of Easter, is also the Orthodox weekend. It's Easter for all those that celebrate Orthodox Easter. Roger and I are going to lunch today with our son; our daughter-in-law is a Romanian Orthodox, and Marina was telling me this morning how her daughter-in-law is Ukrainian. We must pray for our fellow Christians all all over the world.

But what was really important, I remember that today is very much, and we continue in our whole theme of Easter, of the love of God, that through his son and through his love for the world. We remember last week, if any of you were here last week, some of you were, the last bit of Pete's sermon, and he quoted the prayer from Catherine of Siena. The words that really struck me was, 'So it is love, and love alone which moves you'. And love can move us. God's love to us through his resurrected son, Jesus Christ, enables us to be followers and part of his kingdom and family. Love and joy are spoken to us in our readings for today. What do we understand about those words? Those words about binding in God, being with him. Do we think romantically about love? Is it all gushy? Or is this something more solid? As Christians, do we have to appear to be joyful or jubilant all the time, even when it's hard and difficult? What is our understanding of joy, of gladness, receive from God. We live in a world that tries to give us what they think we need to make us joyful and happy. It is a form of love, or is it just superficial?

God has something more for the world. Our readings today interact with each other, which tells us of God's wish for us as Christians, but also for others in our world. We are not just one group of people. God wants it further. A love from God through Jesus that gives us a peaceful joy in our hearts amid all the turmoil of the world around us. And that is what the world was like at the time of Jesus, and the era or period of the early Church; it was in such turmoil. The people lived in a time of political and religious turmoil. I think we think at times that's what we feel like. God loved the world that through his son, he showed his love for all people so that all may have joy and learn to love one another, to learn to live in peace and joy. And doesn't the world really need to hear that and to listen to God, to abide in God? Jesus

talks in the gospel reading how God loved him, and through that he was able to love us, saying abide in his love, accept his love.

Be in a way an equal footing so we can learn to be like him, to be like Jesus, becoming a devoted friend of Christ. A tall order, you might say, how difficult is that? Very difficult, isn't it? The commandment that Christ gives his disciple and us is powerful. We all will have a favourite Bible reading or verses that touch us and remind us of past events and how God, through Jesus, had taken us through life. In verse 16 of our gospel reading, Jesus said, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you'. On my first evening at Theological College at Westcott House in Cambridge, I sat with all the other new students in the chapel. On the wall at the front of the chapel is an icon of Jesus with the words, 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you'. As I stared at the icon and read those words, it became sublime. They were awe-inspiring and inspirational. As I sat in silence waiting for the service to begin, I reflected on my Christian faith and life. How did I get there? How was I able to be sitting there in that chapel? All that I might have felt that I had done. I knew it was not because of what I had done, but what God had done through Jesus Christ and the Holy spirit and his plans for me.

Over 20 years earlier, in about 1994, I stayed for a weekend at Westcott House as part of my reader training, undertaking a preaching weekend. I often had wondered what it was like to study at a theological college, never thinking it was going to be possible. But God had a plan, and in the years that followed, I learned that even the road appeared bumpy and difficult, having a loving and reassuring faith in Christ often brought an unexpected joy. God has a plan for all of us here. Whatever our ages, there is still a plan that God has for us. And as we travel through our Christian lives of faith, he will never let us down. On our journey of faith, God is preparing us all the time for the next stage. Our faith grows after the things we learn, experiences we have, and the people we meet. We may not understand where it is all leading.

When we look back along the path we have travelled, it may twist and turn all over the place, but there will be some visible pattern which shows our life as an evolving event, not a series of random and isolated events which have no meaning. Every day of our lives has a meaning, and we may not understand what it is. As we walk into unknown territory, unexpected encounters happen, and we know we need to take risks as followers of Christ. We plan what we are going to do, and then we realise God has been there before us. God will be present with us and in his way has been preparing the way for us. This walking with God requires faith and commitment on our part, and Jesus prepares us for what is involved. In John 15.10, Jesus talks about keeping his commandments, dwelling in his love, loving each other and living in fellowship with him and with his Father. And if we reflect on our faith journey or you are just beginning your journey, we can see that Jesus already has been there before us, showing us what it means to love by loving us.

The disciples and followers of Jesus did not fully understand what Jesus was commanding them to do at that point, but beginning to understand how his love came from God and it flowed from him to them. Jesus wanted their relationship with him to begin to be equal so they would learn to understand what he wanted them to do after his death. He wanted that interrelating love with him to become a transformation in their lives. And that is for all of us, that we are transformed, our lives become different to what we may

have been expecting. In our Acts reading, Peter and his followers start to realise what Jesus meant. There, Peter was with not just the circumcised followers, the Jews, but with Gentiles who were around as well. Jesus had told him through a dream that God's love was to spread further than just among the Jews. It was to include the Gentiles. He'd just eaten with the Gentiles, with lots of Jews, thinking, 'Oh my goodness, what has he just done?' How confused Peter must have felt. Peter was telling them all about Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, when the Holy spirit fell upon all of them, Jew and Gentile, and his friends were astonished as he heard them speak and understand them in their various tongues, praising and worshipping God.

Peter knew the Gentiles also had to be offered baptism with water as were the other followers of Jesus. There were many followers of Jesus then that didn't know the Jewish laws, didn't understand where they were coming from, but knew that they have a faith and a belief in Jesus Christ. Peter had begun his journey without the physical body of Christ next to him, but knew God and Jesus's Spirit through the Holy Spirit was with him on his journey and had plans for him. All of us, it is a lifetime's work to learn what it means to be so perfectly in tune with God. Yes, it is a lifetime journey for us, but we are not alone, for God, through Jesus, is alongside us.

In one John, our epistle reading reminds us how faith in God can conquer the world. We hear so much that God, Jesus, has no place in our world. And yet when we are open to God, we learn that keeping God's commandment is not burdensome, but it is a joy, a delight, an enjoyment, and peace that no one else can give us. Every day, God is preparing us for the next step and goes ahead of us, preparing the way and waiting for us to join him there.

I am not saying it will always be easy, but peace does come and give us joy in our hearts, often when we least expect it. Psalm 98 today invites us to praise, as we heard, praise the Lord in a new song because he has done marvelous things, yet it concludes that God will be the judge of the world. We all want to judge things, but sometimes we just have to lay it at the foot of the cross and ask God to deal with it. So it is appropriate that on this Sunday in Spring, we should finish our service singing Isaac Watts' musical version of this psalm, the Advent Hymn, 'Joy to World'. Amen.