

ADDRESS

15 May 2022

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter-----  
Acts 11. 1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21.1-16

John 13.31-35

Teach us O Lord, to listen to your Word, and to do your will.

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As we just heard once again, on the night before he died, Jesus commanded us to love one another. Not in any old way, but just as he loves us. It is a key part of what we might call Jesus' last will and testament.

Thankfully, he did not command us to agree with one another. There have been personal and theological divisions within the churches and between the churches from the beginning, as today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles reminds us. Different readings of various parts of the will, we might say.

Christianity began as one of the many sects of Judaism in the first century, so it was natural for new Christians to continue to keep the Jewish laws on ritual purity laid down in the Oral Torah, which had been passed down from generation to generation.

These laws declared that some foods were unclean, and that Jews and Gentiles should not eat together. So when Peter was accused of doing just that, other leading members demanded an explanation. Peter justified his actions carefully, *step by step*, the text says, because this was an important issue, an issue of inclusivity versus exclusivity -- if Peter had made himself impure, then he had forfeited his authority as a leader of the people of the Way, as the first Christians called themselves.

It was bad enough that Peter had accepted Gentiles into the Christian community, as we learn from the previous chapter of the book of Acts, but worse, that he had broken bread with them. He had stepped across the barrier between Gentile and Jew, *between them and us*, as Peter put it. Contemporary literature, like some of the documents in the so-called 'Dead Sea Scrolls, shows that for many Jews of the time, "eating with the gentiles" was not just about being kosher, about eating the right foods; it meant *eating at the table of demons*.

Apparently, feelings about the issue within the church were so strong that they spilled over into the wider Jewish community – the next chapter of Acts tells us that soon after this confrontation the puppet king, Herod Agrippa, laid violent hands on two of the apostles. Peter disappears from the story, and James, the brother of Jesus, appears as the leader of the Jewish Christian community.

When Marty and I were on our first visit to Israel, we were taken to an abandoned Arab village, formerly a majority Christian village, 5 km north-west of Jerusalem, a village called Liftah. The villagers had fled before the advancing Jewish army in 1948, during the first Arab-Israeli war.

When the army entered the village, they found some ancient Jewish ritual baths, possibly 2 000 years old. Almost certainly some of the Arab villagers had used those baths at some time. So they

were now seen as impure – they could not be used again, in fact the whole village was now impure.

So Liftah has never been rebuilt, the site is desolate, although it is prime real estate, in the path of the westward expansion of Jerusalem. So great is the Orthodox Jewish emphasis on ritual purity. However, some people cooling off in one of the baths rushed to cover themselves up when we arrived – trying to hide their impurity perhaps.

Peter justified his actions from his visionary revelation of the risen Christ, telling the brethren he had heard voices saying, over and over, *what God has made clean, you must not call profane*. The food laws of the Torah were man-made, not God-made. A warning that religious tradition may not always be in line with God's will.

As the church grew, and became the dominant religion of the empire, as it became institutionalised, disputes over doctrine and governance continued, and they still do. There has always been division between them and us, on many issues.

The creed which will say shortly was adopted by the first Council of Constantinople the year 381 in an attempt to settle centuries of theological argument about the nature of God. It is implicitly but not explicitly Trinitarian. The disagreements were so strong, they were not only dividing the churches, they were becoming a threat to civil society, so the emperor, Theodosius I, presided over the church council which settled on the wording of the creed.

Last week saw the first General Synod to meet since Covid struck in 2019; the first since same-sex marriage was legalised in Australia in 2017. Now General Synod always exposes differences of personal opinion and theology in the Australian church – I attended one Synod, in Brisbane, as a correspondent for the Brisbane diocesan paper, *Anglican Focus*, and was surprised how little brotherly love was shown in some of the debates, particularly over the issue of the ordination of women. However, even the most fiery speeches failed to disturb civil society, which is no longer concerned with theological disputation, as it was in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

This year the debates were apparently far less heated, more respectful, even on the contentious issue of whether or not sexuality is a salvation issue, whether or not the church should bless same-sex marriages. But the debates, and the final vote against a motion condemning the blessing of same-sex civil marriages, again exposed the cleavage between conservative evangelicals and so-called 'liberals', which has divided Anglicans worldwide, largely because of differing interpretations of particular Biblical passages.

Some disputants on both sides of the debate confuse love and sex – *philia* and *eros*. Passages in both the Old and the New Testament condemn sexual relations between men and men and women and women, but never the deepest of friendships between them. Think of David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi

Last May, as one of our representatives in the Sydney synod, I took part in the election of our new archbishop, along with Peter and Wesley. The process was legalistic rather than spiritual, and sometimes adversarial, like the current Federal election, and it ran over several days, eliminating one name at a time. Why couldn't we have followed Biblical precedent and cast lots to ascertain the will of God? Drawn one of the four names from a hat, or even from a disused mitre?

A few days after the election, the Reverend Michael Jensen, the son of a previous archbishop, gave a thoughtful talk on the ABC about the significance of the vote and the reduced importance of the Australian church in public life. It's an insider's view of the current state of the church we love, and it's online for us all to read. The link is in *Connections*,

One of Michael Jensen's key points is that the church has become too institutionalised. In his words, *less energy needs to be spent on governance and more on sharing Christ. . . . The temptation is to become focussed on finer and finer points of doctrine as markers of true belonging and trustworthiness. Defending the purity and power of the in-club can become a substitute for the real mission.*

That was true of some of the Jewish Christians Peter had to contend with, and true of many Christians ever since. If we are true to Christ's teachings, we need to learn to break down the barriers between them and us, to play our part in making Sydney more like the city of God described in the book of the Revelation – a city that lives for God, and not for greed.

We cannot pray that all people will agree, much less that they will agree with us, but we need to keep praying that all people will truly love one another even when they cannot agree.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. #

[Sydney's almost unnoticed Archbishop-elect: The challenges facing Kanishka Raffel and the Anglican church - ABC Religion & Ethics](#)