

Choral Communion – 9<sup>th</sup> May 2021 – Easter 6.

Acts 10: 44- 48; 1 John 5: 1-6; John 15: 9-17.

*Title: 'You did not choose me but I chose you' (John 15:16).*

Spring is such a wonderful season. Just now it is bursting forth for all to see. Nature once again seems to be on its annual collective growing spree, with each flower, plant and newly born animal metaphorically, and in some cases literally, screaming to be noticed. **Some things seem to grow naturally** in this verdant country of ours. On the Island at present, Bluebells seem to be everywhere, and none the less beautiful for that. But **some things seem to need more active human intervention**. This is all the more the case in less temperate climates than we enjoy in the UK. When I first visited the Holy Land, one of the first things that struck me was how barren and full of stones much of the areas were that were not actively being cultivated. At that point, I began to realise that the wilderness was not just a biblical concept; it was a lived reality for the inhabitants of the Holy Land today. For things to grow there, they not only have to be planted in the first place, but then very carefully nurtured over time. So the vine of which our Lord speaks in our gospel reading this morning is a minor miracle of survival in and of itself, and provides a tangible example of just what can be achieved through the tender loving care of the vine grower. In applying the metaphor of the vine to the Christian Church, Jesus shows so effectively **the interrelatedness of things**. God is the vine grower, Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and the fruits of our labours are the grapes. For us to live fulfilling Christian lives, we have to make time to maintain our relationship with God the Son and God the Father. For only when we do that will we provide an important avenue for God the Holy Spirit to flow through us and into the wider world.

**This interrelatedness of our Christian lives** is what Jesus is talking about when he summarises the Ten Commandments: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength”* and *“Love your neighbour as yourself”* which we heard referred to in this morning’s epistle. Jesus’ summary of the Law is not burdensome, it does not impose upon us any legalistic jargon or concepts which we might at first glance think that any law might do. Indeed, it can itself be summed up in the single word **‘Love’**. Whether we love God or one another, love is love, it is inseparable and indivisible.

In last week’s epistle, which is taken from the chapter before the extract set for this morning’s epistle, in Chapter 4 verses 7 and 16, St. John expands on this theme when he writes: *“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them”*. We are exalted to love not only because love comes from God, but because God is love. So in loving, by what we say and by what we do, we are both allowing and enabling the God of love to be experienced in the wider world (as we are called to be vehicles of God’s loving in the communities in which he has set us), and, through prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, ensuring that our love for his creation is reflected back to God. The example of selfless loving that we are exalted to follow is that of our Lord Jesus Christ himself who by taking upon himself human flesh and inhabiting the most difficult of human experiences, personified this love in action. Because of our Lord’s selfless act, we know that God understands what it is like to live human lives **from the inside out**. Just as a parent loves their child and the child loves their parents, so we love God because God loves us.

**Living loving lives** is a wonderful ideal but putting it into effect, is not as easy as it sounds. Things have a habit of getting in the way. Let's not beat around the bush, Sin so frequently gets in the way of the best of our intentions. Sometimes the sin is obvious such as when, by what we do or fail to do, or by what we say, or fail to say, we actively abuse or neglect the needs of other people, other living things, our immediate environment, or our planet. In this Rogationtide and at the beginning of Christian Aid Week not neglecting the needs of others is particularly in the forefront of our minds. But what about those occasions when we do these things unintentionally. How on earth are we to make sure that we do not fall into this particular trap? Because we are fallible human beings we are never going to be able to eliminate this tendency completely. And when we fall short, we need to acknowledge that that is we have done. Thank God for the sacrament of Reconciliation. But we can actively mitigate against this tendency by regularly checking that we are modelling everything that we do on our Lord Jesus Christ. One of the key things in our spiritual journey of faith is to carefully think through how we respond to difference. If we feel threatened by difference, it is so easy to demonise those who are different from ourselves. The problem of course lies not *with those who are different but in the depths of our own hearts*. There is a storyline running in the soap Coronation Street at present about a young woman who is a Goth and dresses differently to non-Goths, which highlights this very thing. One of the really helpful things that drama can do is to look behind outward appearances to the person behind the mask, by firstly giving us a real sympathy with the character who will be persecuted. This helps us see from the inside out, how wrong persecuting them really is. In St. Luke's Gospel, this is just what Jesus does in the telling of the story of the Good Samaritan. All of us are children of God.

Furthermore, we have a wonderful example in our first lesson from Acts of confronting difference and change head on where a Gentile Pentecost is witnessed, not just by Peter, but also by the Jews who came with him. The fact that Gentiles as well as Jews were just as open to receiving the saving power of the Christian Gospel, without needing to convert to Judaism first, represented a real turning point in the life of the early Christian church. Peter has no doubt whatsoever of the authenticity of what he witnessed in the extract we heard read this morning, he not only baptises Cornelius and his household but, at their instigation, stays with them a few days so can tell them more about their newfound faith. The importance of Cornelius' direct conversion is emphasised by the fact that one and a half chapters are given over to this. Arguably its importance is on a par with the conversion of the ultra-conservative Pharisee Paul, an active persecutor of Christians, to Christianity. The great irony here of course is that it was Paul, the most Jewish of Jews who was called by God to be primarily an apostle to the Gentiles.

And so to return to where I began. Spring is a wonderful season of the year but so is the spiritual springtime of our faith which has its roots in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, both of which proclaim loud and clear **the interrelatedness of things**. Death is part of life and life is full of little deaths. Growing and dying, picking up and letting go, all bound together by God's love of creation and creation's response to being called into being in the first place. One of the difficulties of **striving to live loving lives** is that, at a superficial level, this all sounds so wishy washy and weak, whereas the reality is that the repeated giving and receiving of love to all people and all things is at the centre of everything. and is the toughest thing any of us will be called upon to do. But we are not alone. Emanuel, **God is with us**.