



Fifth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



15 May 2022

READINGS

Acts 11: 1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21: 1-6; John 13: 31-35

A new thing

Loving God thank you for the gift of Your Word – which is a light to our path – and helps us to grow in you. Bless my lips and anoint the words that You have laid upon my heart.

On this fifth Sunday of Easter we continue glorifying the risen Christ. Easter is the time when we both remember and celebrate the new life which has come to us through our Risen Lord. Can you say that you have experienced this “new life” this Easter or, any previous Easter? Are you aware of becoming changed in any way – for the better – over the years? Or has the Easter experience simply passed you by? Over the last few weeks the lectionary offered us the opportunity to consider the stories in which the disciples encounter the Risen Lord. Even after 2,000 years, what is newer than the Resurrection?

In Jesus, our humanity is forever alive with the life and glory of his heavenly Father. The Gospel shows us Jesus, brimming with new life. It is often not easy to adjust to the new - even new shoes, new eyeglasses or, even a new job. The tension between old habits and new desires can be a daunting force to reckon with. Jesus in the Gospel speaks of a “new” commandment. What’s supposed to be “new”? A new life in Christ, of course, is something that can come early or late into the life of a person. For many saints it came after quite a long period of immoral living without God. St Augustine come to mind. For others, like Therese of Lisieux, it came early. She was already a saint when she died at the tender age of 24. For most of us, it is something that may come in waves. In other words: It will not be a once-for-all experience but something that comes at different stages in our life, each time bringing us to a deeper level of understanding, insight and commitment.

The “new life” that the Scripture speaks of is also referred to as “conversion”, a turning round. It means a radical change of vision, of our priorities in life. It means new attitudes, new values, new standards of relating with God and with people and indeed with our whole living environment of which we are a part. Today’s gospel invites us to reflect on signs of new life that Jesus offers and the new commandment that animates that life. The gospel reading, we heard from John takes us back to explore the passage found before the Passion. It tells of events after the departure of Judas at the last Supper.

To understand fully the impact of that line we must look back to the previous verse. As Judas leaves the Last Supper table to go and betray Jesus, John inserts an important detail: ‘It was Night.’ This is more than just a reminder that the evening has drawn on. Light and dark are essential themes in John’s gospel. So, this is a spiritual night: The story is entering the dark night as the forces of betrayal will begin to draw close around Jesus and his disciples. This teaching of Jesus we know and love so well came out of this

darkest night - and it begins with what we have just heard, the new commandment to love one another - Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Jesus teaches us that our love must be visible: 'By this love ... everyone will know that you are my disciples'. Meaning, love is the platform of Christian witness. Our love therefore must be manifest in real actions. Our love for each other is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Jesus. The world will see who and what we love by observing how we spend our time and resources. Fine words and thoughts count for little.

Debbie Thomas says: *"It's through our love that we will embody Jesus, make Jesus relatable, possible, believable, to a dying world"*. If we fail to love one another, the world won't know what it needs to know about God, and in the terrible absence of that knowing, it will believe untruths - that break God's heart. I.e.: that the whole Jesus thing is a sham. That there really is no transformative power in the resurrection. That the universe is a cold, meaningless place, ungoverned by love. That the Church is a flawed institution — not Christ's living, breathing, healing body on earth.

Such is the power we have in our decisions to love or not love. Such are the stakes involved in how we choose to respond to Jesus's dying wish, hope, prayer, and commandment. Now, living this new commandment of love is more than personal kindness. Instead, when Jesus' disciples unite in living this new commandment of love, our lives and the lives around us change; a new and better situation is created. That's what we see in the reading from Revelation, where it says: "Then, I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth... ..Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race...." When we love others as Jesus loved us, God dwells among us. Then the old news of greed, selfishness, and indifference gives way to love. Only God's love is forever new and the source of our joy. "Behold," God says to us today, "I make all things new."

Jesus established the church as a community of disciples who follow his new commandment of love and who share in his new and risen life through the sacraments. He did this so we could show the world what the new life of the Risen Lord looks like. Once we encounter Jesus and fall in love with him, we will look at ourselves and the people around us in a new way. We will NOT see them as enemies or competitors or as annoyances or non-persons. Instead, sharing in the new life of the Risen Lord, we will love them, just as Jesus has loved us and gave his life for us. In a society lacking in consideration, what a difference this could make, for as Jesus said: "This is how all will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Or, as a famous theologian once wrote, "Radiant love lived by Christians is the proof of all (the) teaching, dogmas, and moral precepts of the Church of Christ."

We need to build a new world that is committed to the common good. To do that, people of faith need to live from hearts that are under new management. Modelling our lives on Jesus and his new commandment of love is, admittedly, a life-long task. Modelling this way of love is how we co-operate with him "to make all things new."

Amen