



# Sixth Sunday after Easter

## Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 9 May 2021

### READINGS

Acts 10: 44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5: 1-6; John 15: 9-17

## *The Way of Love*

Imagine hearing for the first time Jesus say directly to you: 'You are my friends. For everything I have learnt from my Father I have made known to you.' This redefines your relationship with Jesus and with God – one of the great shifts in humankind's understanding of our own identity.

In these words and in the realisation that follows, we sense a spiritual awakening. Dr Diana Butler Bass defines this experience by writing: 'Awakenings imply new awareness, inner transformation, a change of heart and mind, and a reordering of priorities, commitments, and behaviour.'

An equally drastic change of heart and mind takes place in the passage from Acts chapter 10. Peter goes against everything he has been taught up to this point. He responds to his awareness of something greater, also leading to spiritual awakening as a response to liberating love. When we experience this type of disruption in faith, our sense of whose we are, what we are to do, and how we understand God changes.

Today's scripture passages can help us to think about religious faith in these terms: whose we are, what we are to do, and how we understand God. We can call these, 'belief, behaviour and belonging'. In each community and in each era these three strands are intertwined, with different emphases and meanings.

The passage from Acts demonstrates for us how Peter and the earliest followers of Christ began to form their identity as believers.

This is an extract from a series of events in the book of Acts which is really worth reading as a whole. To summarise, inspired by a vision, Peter visits the home of Cornelius, a Gentile. That is, someone whom he previously would have avoided in order to remain pure according to Jewish law. It is a radical step for him and for the Jewish followers and surprises everyone involved – including both Peter and Cornelius themselves. Peter gives a sermon there teaching on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But he begins by saying, 'God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.' He expands his own *belief* and that of the early church saying, 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.'

What follows is a sign of the interplay between belief, belonging and behaviour. While Peter is speaking, God affirms Peter's words and the Holy Spirit is poured out on all of those present. Peter and the others recognise the same gift of Pentecost – the sign which Jesus had promised and which they themselves had already experienced. So Peter responds by baptising all the Gentiles who are praising God, because Baptism is the sign of *belonging*.

Here in this passage, we see how their core belief (that God indeed *does* favour one group over others) has been disrupted, and that has changed the rules for behaviour and for belonging. Of course news of this scandal spreads rapidly throughout Judea and when Peter returns to the circumcised believers in Jerusalem, their first reaction is to criticise him. But when he explains, they accept this new dimension of their faith.

As we grow in faith, are we also prepared to have our beliefs challenged and to be shown we might just be wrong? Do we worship a living God of love, or are we defined by a checklist of what to believe? I don't think that all of this was declared final when the writing of the New Testament texts ended in 120 AD. I don't think God stopped speaking 2000 years ago. But I do think we've been shown the pattern and nature of God and we have been shown God's '*how*' which is far greater and more complex than a simple '*what*'.

Our faith continues to be a living experience that includes this connection between how we behave, how we belong, and how we believe. Sometimes we can go wrong when we put too much emphasis on just one of these: having our Sunday words and our Sunday voice, speaking the good news with our mouths, but not living it out in our daily lives. Head answers, without heart change. Or placing so much emphasis on what we hold up to be correct belief and correct behaviour, that we make *ourselves* gatekeepers of belonging. Are we using our beliefs to decide who is in and who is out? Do we get to say who Jesus calls a friend?

In the words of Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, 'I can only look at the seemingly limited space under the tent and think either it's my job to change people so they fit or it's my job to extend the roof so that they fit. Either way, it's misguided because it's not my tent. It's God's tent.'

Why am I suggesting that this account of Peter's awakening in Acts is not just about a once-off event but about a way of believing, behaving and belonging that requires ongoing growth, humility and open-heartedness?

Some of my reasons lie in this week's passage from John's gospel. Here Jesus says, 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love...' And in verse twelve Jesus says, 'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.' And a few verses later this passage repeats the command: 'Love each other.'

The group we read about in Acts were not called Christians. They hadn't started a religion. They were people committed to following the way of Jesus – in fact they were called 'People of the Way.' They were committed to enacting the teachings of Jesus and here we have his primary command: 'Love each other.' This was their experience of believing, behaving and belonging – remaining in Love.

Today when we use the word, 'remain' or 'abide,' it means staying still. But love does not stay still. Rev Mattox writes: 'We must "abide" in the Love of Christ, which is anything but static and unchanging. Instead, "remaining" in Christ's love requires us to be ever moving, ever expanding in our concept of who belongs and who should be loved and valued.' It is an expansive, challenging way to live.

Instead of sitting comfortably under the label Christian, let's ask what that means for us every day. Is it an awakening we need, or a wake-up call, reordering our priorities and our commitment to God's intention for all of creation? If we want to know God, we must love. If we want to follow Jesus, we must love. To love is to surrender. Love allows our belief, our behaviour and our belonging (which is about our identity) to grow beyond ourselves. To love freely is to participate in the very nature of God.

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<sup>1</sup> The references to spiritual awakening and the terms 'belief, behaviour and belonging,' are attributed to Dr Diana Butler Bass *Christianity After Religion*.