

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year B

There is something about freedom from boundaries that runs through today's readings. In so many parts of John's Gospel we see Jesus flouting social taboos and boundaries. His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well is a brilliant example of taboos ignored in favour of enlightening another human being. Likewise, speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus reveals the breadth of mind involved in being born from above, that is, adopting a new consciousness of the Divine.

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48 This reading is made up of a selection of verses from the second half of chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles. The context centres on Cornelius, a Roman officer (Centurion) in charge of 100 men, a devout man who gives alms to the poor and believes in the Jewish God. Luke refers to such people as 'God-fearers'. In a vision Cornelius, living in Caesarea, is told by a messenger of God to send for Peter who was currently staying at Jaffa, the port town on the Mediterranean coast adjacent to present day Tel Aviv (= Spring Hill). Caesarea is also on the coast, around 62 kms north of Jaffa.

In the meantime, Peter himself had a vision of a large sheet being lowered to the ground, and on the sheet were all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles and birds. A voice told Peter to kill and cook one of the creatures for food. Peter objected that in obedience to Jewish kosher law he would not dare eat anything unclean. The voice replied that everything God had made was clean and no one had the right to declare any creature to be unclean.

The vision made Peter realise that differences, like clean and unclean, Jew and non-Jew, were irrelevant in the eyes of God. Convinced that God shows no partiality he then readily embraced Cornelius and his family as worthy to be part of the community of Christ. He saw plainly that these non-Jewish people had come to faith in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and he followed through on this by baptizing them.

A couple of takeaways stand out here: 1) two conversions take place – Peter is converted to a new way of seeing non-Jews as eligible to be part of the body of Christ and Cornelius and his family are converted to a new way of seeing Jesus Christ. 2) Luke highlights the crucial role and importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian community.

Psalms 97/98 This poem is a product of the postexilic period, after 539 BCE when the exiles had returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city walls and the temple. Solomon's temple had stood for over 300 years and was destroyed by the Babylonian army in 586. The psalm points to the importance of the ritual solemnity and singing in the temple's liturgy in honour of God's holiness.

More importantly it acknowledges that the people of God have an obligation to live in such a way that they reflect the divine holiness in their daily lives. The psalm calls for joy in the satisfaction that comes from a life of compassion in imitation of the Compassionate One.

1 John 4:7-10 In an earlier chapter the author of this letter already gave emphasis to the importance of mutual love in the community of Christ and now he restates it as a defining characteristic of the Jesus people. At his last meal with his friends Jesus declared love to be the badge that identified his followers (John 13:35). But the writer is not just repeating himself, he is progressing his thought. Earlier, he wrote that we actually live in the light of life when we are motivated and directed by love. In today's reading he goes further and reminds us that God is love itself and this is the ground and very reason for our life of love.

Jesus' main focus was on living a positive and constructive life

We read in the Gospel of John that Jesus came to give us life, and life in its fullest (John 10:10). This is quite a different emphasis from the one taken up over the centuries by mainstream Christian theology in its obsession with avoiding sin and getting to heaven. Jesus' main focus was on living the positive and constructive life that would promote the reality of the reign of God in our world. The kingdom/realm of God is within you, here and now, he said (Luke 10:9), so, all we have to do is sign on to it by the way we live with a renewed consciousness of what it means that the very essence of God is love. And we know this is expressed through our growing to wholeness in our relationships, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the disadvantaged, visiting the sick – it is all spelt out in Matthew 25.

Elsewhere, Jesus tells us he came to bring the good news about how to be part of God's world, the reign of God (Luke 4:43). It is clear from his words and his whole mission that he did not come to bring us religion, which has developed overtones of sacred versus secular in some kind of opposition. This mystical Gospel of John shows Jesus encouraging us to 'be born from above'.

Using this language in his conversation with the Pharisee, Nicodemus, Jesus is urging us to adopt a new kind of consciousness, a universal consciousness that makes us aware of our connectedness to the Divine that is in all creation. This goes beyond the boundaries of the kind of religion that is defined by doctrines and ritual – not to mention the binary hurdles of hierarchy and authority.

If I am focused on reaching out to the other... I have no time or inclination to judge others

Jesus' attitude is fairly transparent. If I am focused on reaching out to the other with the love that is expressed with respect and compassion or cheat and play dirty tricks on others. I am too absorbed in looking for the goodness in others; in lifting my consciousness to see the Divine in others.

John 15:9-17 This reading comes from the Johannine version of the Last Supper Jesus had with a group of his closest followers. In his discourse Jesus speaks of 'commandment' but in Jewish tradition commandments were not just seen as rules to follow but were regarded as gateways by which we allow the Divine to be present in our lives. The rabbis considered the carrying out of a command to be a prayer in the form of a deed.

So, Jesus is saying just as the Father is present in his life as he carries out the divine wishes so he also is present in our lives when we live by the supreme commandment of love. Prompted by appreciating the Divine in others we become conscious of God's presence in our relationships. Notice how Jesus bases his love commandment not on the association of master to servant but on the bond of friendship where each party takes delight in the goodness of the other.

We also get a vision of Jesus' last will and testament in his words at this final friendship meal. He has no son to carry on his legacy only the women and men who have tied themselves to him with a commitment to live by his teachings. All he has to leave them is something of himself, which is encapsulated in his entreating them to make love the trademark of their union with him, with each other and with creation.

In today's world, where it is usual for individuals to take sides and favour the mores and traditions of the group they were born into, it becomes normal for people to be caught in divisions and resentment. Very often these are irrational and cause blindness to the worth and goodness of the other. A quick but intelligent reading of John's Gospel will reveal a Jesus who has no time for negative thoughts or passing judgment. He is happy to flout customs and taboos that are based on prejudice and culpable ignorance.

Once you replace negative thoughts with positive ones, you'll start having positive results.

Willie Nelson

Two senior ladies were playing cards when one looked at the other and said, 'Now don't be angry. I know we've been friends for a long time, but I just can't remember your name.

I've thought hard and it won't come to me. Please tell me what your name is.'

Her friend glared at her – just glared, for three minutes.

Finally, she said, 'How soon do you need to know?'

Laurie Woods