

LOVING v RIGHT

Acts 11:1-18/
John 13:31-35

April 24 2016

Very early on in the history of the church a man called Peter had the experience of meeting up with non-Jews who were interested in knowing more about Jesus, and eventually wanting to become followers of Christ.

Totally sceptical at first, Peter comes to believe that God is using this experience to teach him and the leaders of the church something new.

This story is related in Acts 10.

As far as Bible chapters go Acts 10 is a pretty big chapter.

Then in the reading that we heard today (Acts 11) we basically have Peter meeting up with the church in Jerusalem and telling all the believers there in his own words what had happened.

One of the reasons this story gets put in twice is because it was so important. The conclusion that the followers of Jesus came to as a result represented a seismic shift in their understanding of who was of concern to God and who the Gospel was for.

Up until now they had assumed that the message of Jesus was a message for the Jews. And the gospel was for the Jewish people.

Sure God may be the Creator of the whole world, and God may care for the people of the world.

But first and foremost, God cares for the Jews. They are the chosen ones, they're the special ones, they're the ones that God loves most.

But now they were realising that while Jesus' work and message may have started with them it wasn't ending there – and Christ's call was an invitation to all people everywhere.

So if you ask what is actually happening in this chapter?

The answer is that the church is coming to a new understanding that God's love and inclusion is wider and broader than they had ever thought before.

And maybe there are two lessons here for us.

Biblical literalists will miss what God is saying in our time.

We need to have a mind that is open to the new thing God is teaching us.

You see one of the arguments against the Gospel being for all came from people who quoted passages of scripture to back up their claims.

According to some passages of the Bible Peter should not have eaten with Gentiles for they were unclean.

According to other passages, he should not have eaten the food that was on offer. And of course, if you were male, the sign of belonging to God was circumcision. As these Gentiles weren't circumcised, they couldn't be acceptable to God. But the argument that won out was that God was trying to show them something new and that the Spirit was leading them to a new understanding. They were entering a new age.

Some Bible texts were superseded by the work of God's Spirit leading the church into a deeper and better truth.

God is always leading us into new understandings. And we need to be open enough to listen to the Spirit of God, and not a slave to rules of the past.

Thank God the Christians agreed that Gentiles were to be part of this new movement. Otherwise few of us would be here today!

Now there are two ways to create group identity.

One way is to have some *things* in common.

The other way is to have some *enemies* in common.

The first way is to create identity and a sense of belonging by who you *include*.

The second way is to do that by who you *exclude*.

Sadly, the second way is often seen – not just by small groups or organisations but by humanity as a whole.

It seems as if in every generation there are some body of people who are placed as less important or inferior or fair game for blame and criticism.

And it's taken humanity a long time to counter it.

Women, children, slaves, foreigners, the disabled, people of colour, people of a different nationality, left-handed folk, homosexual people – the list goes on.

One way you can feel good about yourself is by not belonging to one of these "less important" groups.

And if you think about the way in which God works in partnership with us human beings, you could say that one of the big things God does with us is bringing us the realisation that groups of people should not be despised or seen as inferior but included and important.

Over the years God has worked away at this, and we've come a long way, though even today there are examples that God tries to bring to our notice.

But there's another way to create identity which is not about having a common enemy or lists of people to shut out.

It's to have something positive in common which unites.

This is what Jesus is talking about in our John reading.

He's about to take leave of his friends for the last time.
The flesh and blood Jesus will not be with them much longer. This is a last chance for Jesus to get a message to them.
It's a most crucial time.

And so what does he say?
He says he has a new commandment for them.
Just think how vital that must have been to Jesus ...

They lived in a world that was filled with religious laws and legal commands and Jesus says he has a "new" commandment.

How important is this?!!
It is clear that what Jesus is going to say must be looming large in his mind.

So what does he say?
Jesus says *"And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."*

Then he adds this.
*"If you have love for one another, then everyone will **know** that you are my disciples."*

I was born in the 1950s when Church of Scotland membership was at its height. By the sixties, churches were still growing well, but struggling a bit with retaining young people. There were some good going young people's groups but not all churches had them. A few of the lucky churches seemed to draw in the young folk in a particular area.

My father's church was a very strong church numerically and he was fortunate enough to be minister of a church that had a big Youth Fellowship, but he didn't really know much about it. It took in people from age 16, it was run by some young adults (the oldest being about 26), and it seemed a very strong group, but although they were committed to the Christian faith, but my dad didn't have much personal involvement.

So he decided to try to find out more, and for this he needed a spy – me!

One day he asked me if I would go along to the YF seeing as I was now 16. I said "No."
He said *"Look, if you just go once you don't need to go back. I just want you to tell me what it's like. If you don't like it you don't need to return. I'm asking you as a favour."*

I didn't want to go. But I did it, knowing that I wouldn't have to go again.

Here is the funny thing.

The church was so big, that the folk in that group did not know I was the minister's son. Although I would be at church most Sunday's I wasn't in with their crowd. And of course they had no idea that I was really infiltrating the group as a spy!

So as far as they were concerned I was just some new kid who had randomly turned up.

They accepted me - not as *'the minister's son'* and not as a *'spy'*.

By the same token, I didn't know one single person there, but once I turned up on that first evening, I didn't want to leave.

The love and care that these people had was what made me want to stay in the group. It was like being home.

Now I would soon come to discover other attractions...

Being with people of my own age and discovering a whole new set of friends.

The fact that these folk were serious about their faith – it wasn't just a youth club where people sat around playing pool.

The realisation that if I hung around some of the older boys I could probably learn a bit of how to play guitar.

And the fact that over the years I was in the group, this place was probably where my next girlfriend would be coming from – it was a big group!

But let me be completely honest. All that stuff was only apparent once I made the decision to stay and I had been there for a while.

But my decision to stay in the first place, and not just leave after my first reluctant visit was about one thing only.

The love and care that group had for one another, the friendly atmosphere and their effort to include a total unknown and outsider like me – that was what drew me in.

It was the first and it remained always the most important thing about that group of people.

You know it's quite possible to have a very friendly and caring group where the love and the care is shared only among the people already in the group.

There's a famous story of a woman who went a church for the first time.

Afterwards a church member said to her *"You'll like it here. We are a very friendly church."*

She said *"I don't want a friendly church. I want a church where I can make friends"*

When I first read these words I didn't understand them.

Her point was the sometimes people can be friendly among their own group.
Crunch time comes when a new person arrives.

Will **they** be welcomed?

Will **they** experience the love and care?

Often churches will boast that they are *'like a family'*. That sounds very nice indeed till you realise that it's not easy to join a family.

It's not easy to be part of a family if you aren't already in it.

A **family** church could be a **clique** church.

We need to make sure that our love and care spreads beyond the people we already know to those who are just in the door and those who might come in the door next week.

That's where it really matters.

I like the story about the homeless man who comes to a church in a posh neighbourhood. He walks in with his clothes crumpled and dirty, carrying his possessions in a bag, and proceeds to sit down near the front.

Nobody knows what to do with him, so they tell the minister.

The minister goes out to speak to the man before the service gets under way.

"Don't you know this is the house of God? You can't come to church dressed like that. Go away and ask God what you should wear to church."

The man shuffles out.

Next week the man is back – same clothes and same bags as before.

"Didn't you do what I said?" asked the minister.

"Yes. I asked God what I should wear." replied the man.

"Well what did God say?"

"God said, 'I don't know because I've never been to that church!'"

Can you imagine what the church would be like if we all started being known for our love and care?

Can you imagine what it would be like if these words were the words that sprung to mind when others outside of church thought about us?

Yet we spend our time arguing about stuff and about what we think and obsessing about who is right or who is wrong.

If we spent as much effort in showing love as we do in trying to be on the *"right side of the debate"* the world would see a different church.

So am I saying that there is no place in trying to get things right?

That we should have no opinion about any issues?

No! Of course I'm not saying that.

Of course we should care about the issues we face.

But we need to spend less time on that and more time in being part of a community where people are welcomed and accepted and included and cared for

and encouraged.

It is love that will change the world – not our opinions – or even our beliefs - however much we may like to cling to them.

We can have a regular prayer life.

We can study the Bible and have a balanced view of scripture.

We can set up community projects.

We can get the *woman minister* and *woman elder* issue “right.”

We can get the *gay* issue “right.”

We can go to Faslane and pray for peace.

We can drop in groceries to foodbanks.

All of these things are good.

All of these things we should do.

But in themselves they are not the most important things.

For people outside the church, what will hit them most is when we love.

The most important thing is to love.

*“If you have love for one another, then everyone will **know** that you are my disciples.”*

All ministers have favourite themes to bang on about.

One of mine is that fact that God loves us.

I try to remind us (and me) of it again and again.

God really does love you. God’s love does not change.

God loves us without us deserving that love.

It’s pretty good news. I make no apologies for sharing it whenever I can.

God’s love for us is a fixed thing. We don’t need to do anything to receive that love.

But there is one thing we *can* do for God.

There is one thing we *can* do to show our thanks.

It’s in the commandment Jesus has given.

We can show love to others.

We can care for people.

We can be compassionate.

We can include those on the outside.

As God has loved us, we too can love others.

And if we do that, then the world will know that we are Jesus’ disciples.