

Fifth Sunday of Easter

A sermon preached at Meadow Court Farm in the parish of St Andrew Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker on Sunday 19 May 2019

Readings: Acts 11 vv 1-18 and John 13 vv 31-35

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles is a glimpse of one of the most remarkable moments in the New Testament.

It is a fascinating example of how to cope with change and conflict, both of which are as significant in the Church today as they have been over the centuries. When we are dealing with things that matter so much because they touch our understanding of ourselves which our faith and our experience of Church has shaped, there is inevitably the possibility of conflict when we try to bring about change.

The early church faced a big issue. Was Christianity merely a sect within Judaism or was it something bigger? Could Gentiles become Christians and if so, did they have to be circumcised and keep the entire Law of Moses? Must they decline to eat foods that are forbidden in the Mosaic Law?

St Peter had a vision. He saw something like a great sheet coming down from heaven. In it were all sorts of creatures, and many of them were described in the Jewish Law as unclean. Peter was told to kill and eat, but he protested that he had never eaten anything the Law forbade. God replies, 'Do not count as unclean what I count as clean'.

Suddenly, a Gentile Roman soldier and his entourage arrived. Because of his vision, Peter realised that the old distinctions between clean and unclean were gone. He entered the house of 'unclean' Gentiles. This was unimaginable for any pious Jew. And while Peter preached to them, there was, as it were, a second Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came down on them because they believed in Jesus. And so having been inwardly baptised in the Holy Spirit, Peter baptised them outwardly with water – baptism was to be the ceremony of initiation into the Christian faith. Circumcision was no longer a requirement. The practice of the Jewish people over centuries was overturned in a moment.

Peter reports to the Church in Jerusalem what had happened, concluding with these words: 'Who was I that I could hinder God? When they heard this they were silenced.' The Christians in Jerusalem, all of them rooted in Judaism, receive the news with joy. The meeting had started with anger and opposition to what he had done. Their response was a complete turnaround.

Of course, as we read on in Acts and in some of Paul's letters, this did not entirely solve the issue; there was continuing conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. But in the end the Holy Spirit paved the way for the great Gentile mission led by St Paul. We are part of the fruits of that mission. Christianity was not to be a Jewish sect, but a world-wide faith where there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free.

This is a challenge to the Church in our generation. For many, the Church is a rock of stability in a turbulent and fast-changing world. This is important. But we cannot ignore the huge changes around us and imagine that the Church is immune from change.

Whilst comfortable safety is attractive, that's not always going to be appropriate, much as I might like it to be so, because it's easier that way. We must do what the Lord

requires, even if there is tension and even conflict as we seek to discern where the God of surprises will lead us next.

There is a challenge to us and to all Christians, to avoid being trapped in our safe comfort zone. In every generation, God unfolds to us new truth and new light. Yes, we have to test it to see whether this is truly God at work or whether it is merely a human scheme. But if God is at work, we must not resist. “Who was I that I could hinder God?” says Peter. When they heard this they were silenced.”

The challenge is to do whatever we believe God is calling us to do with care and love, to model the command of Jesus in the gospel reading: ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’

If we can transform conflict and cope with change in a way that honour Jesus’ commandment and invitation, we will indeed have something precious to offer the fractious world around us.

Conflict has been part of human experience since the beginning of time. It is a powerful witness when we handle conflict well and, by doing so, honour Jesus.