

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Collect: God our redeemer, you have delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of your Son: grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life, so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 10.44-48: While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Gospel: John 15.9–17: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Reflection:

Agape is the Greek word that we find many, many times in the New Testament as the word to describe God's love: love that is received within, that abides within and that is seen to be shared with all by the early Christian communities. Love seen and made real by Jesus in his words and actions, in his teaching and in his acceptance of all. Seen and made real by Peter, Paul, Philip and those of the Christian communities who in facing sometimes the hardest of times lived in a way that showed and shared agape love.

Think of some of the key passages that you recall or remember from the bible:
1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Or on the upper room the teaching of Jesus when he washed the disciples' feet, that includes today's passage, or the words that often begin a marriage service from the first letter of John. "God is Love. We have seen God's love in action. In loving one another God is a part of us. God's love shown and seen in our loving. And in sharing in God's love for the world, we are given confidence to face all that the future might bring."

Agape the love found in Jesus and the crux of how the communities described in the Acts of the Apostles were living. Love that puts the other person first, that is not about personal ego or confined to being within a family. Love that desires the very best for the other whoever that other might be and love that can lead a person to disregard self, even to the extent of the laying down of one's own life for another.

And what was the impetus leading Jesus and the followers to live this way? They firmly believed that God was already on his way, his love coming through in what Jesus had said and done and now also coming through in the life of their communities. They had experienced this in the intimate way in which Jesus had dared to address God in the affectionate and loving way of a child to a parent, Abba Father, and now this way of communicating with God was being shared by all.

We do need to see more clearly the connection between the ministry of Jesus, what he said and did and the way the early community described in Acts embraced this. The way of Jesus taken up at his baptism, his life bringing in and breaking in God's kingdom through the radical all-embracing love that healed those broken by life and brought into community all who had been excluded and isolated. And Peter, Paul, Philip and the others convinced that since his death this love was now being made visible in their lives bringing hope to all and restoring the excluded to community.

Their experience being that of limitless love for all, that embraces the whole of life. Love that supports and helps to sustain another person in their need reflecting a belief that the other person and their welfare is the most important thing of all.

In the short letter to Philemon, Paul emphasises this way of love in the encouragement to Philemon to set free and embrace fully as a friend and equal the runaway slave Onesimus.

Philip showed this way of love in his open conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch, who is then drawn to baptism and who through his baptism, just like those described as gentiles in our passage today from Acts, embraces himself the agape love for all, that does not divide, put down or ignore the outsider but instead seeks above everything else the welfare of that other person whoever that might be.