

5th Sunday of Easter 2022

Acts 11:1-18 Rev 21:1-6 John 13:31-35

In speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Love one another as I have loved you.....by this everyone will know that you are my disciples.

Sometimes accepting our weaknesses can open the way to something positive. A very full week and post-covid fatigue has led me to look back at a previous sermon that was inspired by the seminal words of Jesus in this week's gospel – and I have decided to recycle it – because today I couldn't respond to the message of love that is at the heart of our faith any better and because the wisdom of children is always worth hearing again!

The sermon began by recalling an experience of leading an assembly in our schools:

I had been telling the parable of the mustard seed: the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed of all, which when it is sown grows into the largest tree and puts out its branches so that all the birds of the air can make their nests. As I told the story I unwrapped the tree – and then asked the children to add the birds in the branches. Then we wondered together about what their favourite part of the story was, what the most important part was – and most significantly who the birds might be.....

Some of their answers were inspiring:

They noticed that there were 12 birds (actually by chance) so they first suggested the birds might be the disciples.....

Then some said the birds might be us.....

The tree might be the whole world and the birds are all the people in the world

The birds might be the people we have lost

And from a seven year old – the birds coming to the tree is like the sixth day of creation when all the people are made on the earth

And – may be the tree is God – and the birds are everyone

The kingdom of God is like the smallest of seeds which grows in to the largest tree and stretches out its branches so that all the birds of the air can make their nests in it.

From today's gospel:

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.

The Kingdom of God is like a tree in which all the birds make their nests:

Perhaps the birds are the disciples:

Our gospel today shows us that the disciples were the first to experience the radical love of God that Jesus reveals. He calls them as a group to make that radical love their identifying characteristic. We so often talk about "love" as the centre of the way we live together – loving our neighbour, but the word love, in English can mean so many different things – and it is important that we notice the full commandment Jesus gives us: "*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*"

The distinctive thing about the love Jesus' disciples are being asked to show is that it is modelled on his love. Jesus love is not fluffy and nice, it is robust and costly. It is not just a feeling towards other people, but an attitude of being, a habit of life, a virtue which directs everything that he is and does and it is the revelation of God's love.

God's love is ecstatic – outward flowing: out poured in creation, totally committed to that creation not just by holding it in being but becoming a part of it, and by drawing human beings through his spirit into knowing relationship with him.

So how has Jesus loved his disciples: he has called them into a life with him to come to experience the love of the God who holds them in being and sets them free from sin (all that opposes life and love); he has given them the fullness of his time in sharing his life with them, he has taught them, and perhaps learnt from them, depended on them for his practical wellbeing, he has shared his ministry of teaching and healing with them, loved them all in their differences and of course, forgiven them; he will go on to die for them, taking on himself all that opposes relationship with God, and offering the freedom of the relationship he shares with the Father through the resurrection and gift of the Spirit.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

This is not just about being nice people or even about being good. Jesus is asking his disciples to learn how to live their whole life inspired by the courageous love they have seen in him.

It took his disciples a long while to begin to appreciate how radical and challenging it is to love in that way, but together they began to discover that radical love could not just be shared in their own circle.

The Kingdom of God is like a tree which puts out its branches so all the birds of the air can nest in its branches.

Maybe the birds are us

Maybe the birds are all the people in the world.

From reading from the book of Acts:

The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.

Through the book of Acts we see how radical love shapes the newly growing church: first those who are baptised pool their resources, making sure that no one is in need, they create a church structure that gives some a role of teaching the new message of God's freedom in love through Jesus and gives others a role in making sure the most vulnerable in the community is cared for. And then this great surge out into the wider culture takes place – the preachers going out amongst those who have previously been seen as outsiders, those without proper faith, and discovering that God's love is so at work in them that the community must be outward facing to meet them.

And we would not be here today if such outward facing radical love was not the distinctive mark of Christian life.

Discovering how to love beyond their own circle, to recognise that those beyond their Jewish community were the recipients of God's love, took time – and Peter's willingness to spend time with, and to recognise God's Spirit at work in those beyond his faith as a result of God's guidance in a dream, caused conflict to start with as our reading shows. But through Acts, both in this story and in the ministry that Paul develops we see the earliest church discovering that it doesn't exist for itself – that it is to reach out and draw others into the way of radical loving. And I would like to suggest that ideally that has been the distinctive mark of

Christian communities ever since, the distinctive characteristic we are always fallibly working towards: Just as I have loved you, love one another – discovering that “one another” is those who share our church life, those beyond in our neighbourhoods and those who share our planet (and most recently we have begun to remind ourselves that means more than just the other human beings!)

We will express this love in different ways – and each of us will have particular priorities in our loving. This week is Christian Aid week – with a theme: Turn hunger into hope.

In Zimbabwe, the climate crisis is causing aching hunger for families like Jessica's.

For the first time in a generation, global poverty is rising. The combined effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, conflict, and drought have robbed communities like Jessica's of the power to provide for their children. It's unjust.

This Christian Aid Week:

- We stand with the resilient women - like Jessica - who are determined to lift their families out of hunger
- We raise our voices to call for climate justice
- We pray that families will stay strong during times of drought

Together, we hope to restore justice to our world, and protect the future for our children and grandchildren.

Please give to help women grow crops that survive in the drought. You can help turn hunger into hope.

With every gift, every action, every prayer, every one of us can change lives.

Supporters of Christian Aid see their work as a fulfilling of Jesus' commandment to love one another in very practical ways – providing medical support, agricultural education, community organisation and disaster aid wherever it is needed. Our giving to this cause is an expression of our discipleship too – one way by which all may know we are his disciples.

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest seed that grows into the biggest tree and stretches out its branches so all the birds of the air can make their nest in its branches.

Perhaps the birds are us

There is a second and very important way of hearing Jesus' command:

Just as I have loved you, love one another:

Jesus' love does not just show us the love we are called to give others – Jesus love is what we are offered as the experience which enables us to love radically like him.

It is the place we start from – knowing that we are loved by God, receiving the love of Jesus ourselves – finding that there is a branch of God's kingdom where we have a safe nest.

So even before we think about how we show God's love to others, it is good to notice how we receive God's love, to notice and stay with how that makes us feel, and how it guides us to be.

I've talked before about a practice called the examen: reflecting gently on your day and noticing what brought you alive, helped you give and receive love, gave you a sense at being at one with the world with others and with God, brings you a sense of gratitude.

If we aspire to discover how we can love others with the radical love of Jesus, our best starting point is to allow ourselves to receive the radical divine love in which we are created and held in being, which we receive through the hands and hearts of the humans around us, and which we discover in all that shapes and inspires our hearts.

The earliest Christians as they grappled with living out this radical love very soon discover – in the words of the letter of John:

In this is love – not that we loved God, but that God loved us

The kingdom of God is like the smallest seed that grows into the biggest tree so that all the birds of the air can find a home in its branches.

Jesus, I wonder if that seed is love? May it be so - Amen