

I'm In!

Acts 11¹⁻¹⁸; Psalm 148; Revelation 21¹⁻⁶; John 13³¹⁻³⁵

Who was I that I could hinder God? [Acts 11¹⁷]

I often wonder what a first-time visitor to our worshipping community thinks about us. What appears to be important to us? How important is God in what we do? How do we appear to relate to each other? How welcoming are we? Can you remember what you thought when you first came here?

From our readings today, we find that challenge:

- ✠ From the Gospel we learn about our relationships with one another - we are given the **new commandment, that you love one another**. It is a love that reflects Jesus' love and it is the clearest witness to the world around us that we disciples. The love between us extends the love within the community of God and **glorifies** God.

So what does love look like? Overt displays of hugging and kissing can be misleading, so too can the formality of the handshake. Surely it is in the honesty and integrity of the other person being fully the focus of your attention - and responding to them within our capacity (whether that is practical help, prayer or laughing with them). It is to do for that person what we believe Jesus would do and to be consciously aware that we represent him.

- ✠ From the Revelation we learn about our priorities - we look forward to being with God and being at home in his presence. The shadow that hangs over humanity, **death**, is done away with, it will **be no more** and the effects of death in the grief we feel are addressed; **he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying will be no more.**

What does hope look like? In a world where there is no security; in a society confused by politics and devastated by inequality; in personal lives where there seem to be fewer certainties, how is hope made visible. Surely, it is in exuding that confidence that God holds all things - in life and death - in his hands and that, without question or hesitation, we trust God more than we trust ourselves.

- ✠ From Acts we learn that the things that we think are important to God are simply the things that are important to us. Peter had wanted to be a Christian living under the Jewish food laws that were familiar to him and a faith shared with people who were like him. God challenges this - first, in a dream, by challenging Peter to eat unclean, unkosher food - his defence, **nothing unclean has ever entered my mouth**, but God responding with, **What God has called clean, you must not call profane**. Then the Gentiles come knocking at the door and **the Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us**.

When God is involved in any community it isn't like looking in a mirror and it isn't always safe or comfortable. I confess that I very much enjoyed the class distinctions on the ship while sailing back from the US last week - but that was probably because I wasn't in steerage. But in the Church there can be no class system and God's upside-down kingdom is evident when the greatest becomes known through their willingness to serve. We have to be brutally honest with ourselves about the barriers that we put up between ourselves and those God calls us to share our pilgrimage with - and then to deal with ourselves so that our fear of difference doesn't excuse any practical distinctions: remember that we learned John 3:16 from our earliest years and that God loves the world, not just the bit that we like!

Peter's argument with the Church in Jerusalem, as it debates the status of Gentile Christians, was simply, **who was I that I could hinder God?**

Our relationships, our priorities and our welcome must be such that they do not hinder God - they must be such that they reflect God in every aspect of our existence. To try to see ourselves through the eyes of a stranger may just help see ourselves through God's eyes.