

5th Sunday of Easter - God makes all things new!

When we arrived in Handsworth over 7 years ago, I was the first of the two of us to preach – Fr Bob wanted to save himself for Easter Day, and so I preached on Maundy Thursday. The Gospel reading that day was the same as it is today, for possibly my last sermon. In that time, how much has changed – the fabric, the congregation, the commitment to God, who is always making all things new – and what an exciting time it is for St Marys as a new chapter dawns!

In all our readings today we can see God creating and doing new things – in Acts - a new vision leading to new Christians, in Revelation, God is making all things new, and in the Gospel, there is, of course, the New Commandment!

At the time Acts was written by Luke, there was still a little uncertainty around what Christianity was! Was it a new way for an old faith, or was it a totally brand-new faith? In our passage today, it is made crystal clear that God has done a new thing – the old Jewish faith would not have entertained Gentiles within its ranks, whereas the reading today shows a completely new way. The story of the conversion of Cornelius and his household is told twice – once in chapter 10 as an historical account, and once again in the very next chapter where Peter is defending himself to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. The leaders were

worried that Peter had eaten and defiled himself by being with Gentiles, so he carefully takes them through the reasoning behind that. He told them he was praying – everything tends to start there – which led to him being in a trance, and from there into a vision. And what a vision – all manner of animals, many of them denied to the Jews because they were unclean, being shown as acceptable to God. What an outcome, because even though God had to show Peter this vision 3 times, such was Judaism engrained in him, he finally saw the light – that all God's creation is good. He went to the house of Cornelius, ate there, preached the gospel, and, bingo all are saved.

Interestingly, when the leaders in Jerusalem heard this, they praised God, saying 'Then God has given even the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life'. Strange words! Would you not say, God has saved even them? but no, repentance has been given that leads to new life.

I have heard it said we live here as in a Sikh or a Moslem village – and I guess they are our Gentiles! Do we see them as the Jews would have, or do we see an amazing opportunity? We can tell them of the repentance that leads to life. Christianity, the only faith that offers forgiveness and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit – repentance as a gift, not a chore. God can do new things here! It makes good sense for us to put a lot of thought and effort into mission at the church door; to make people feel welcome,

valued, and affirmed. The mighty power of the Holy Spirit can open the hearts of anyone to know the saving love of Jesus Christ—even those whom we have determined to be “not one of us”.

Then we read Revelation where God is making all things new – ALL things. Our God is not the God of antiques, he is the God of new, He is here and with us now. The text reads: See the home of God is with mortals, He will dwell with us, and we will be his people and He Himself will be with us. A new way, a new God, not a lofty, unreachable being full of wrath, but a loving, bountiful, forgiving God that lives with us in the form of His Holy Spirit because of Jesus.

Does he offer salvation to a few? No. To all the thirsty he will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. To anyone who asks – to anyone who knows to ask. This highlights the profound importance of welcome at the heart of our mission. Welcome from the first moment people come through that door to the moment they leave. Heaven has come to earth in shape of Gods Kingdom – something unthinkable before Jesus, but very possible now because of his sacrificial love for us

Which leads me quite nicely into the Gospel! We have heard Jesus give views on law before! In Marks Gospel, he waves away the Old Testament laws, all 613 of them. He says the laws can be summed up in 2 laws – Love God with

all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself! Very worthy and true, but today’s reading is different. Jesus is talking to his own disciples not long before he goes to the cross. The new commandment is not for everyone, it is for them – his own chosen people. He tells them to love one another as he has loved them. this is not a call to love in any other way, but to each other. Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” By this single act, will the world know that we are His disciples.

Look around you – the commandment seems impossible – and if it were to love everyone in the world as Jesus loved us (not love your neighbour as yourself), it would be totally impossible. But we are called to love each other, those who love Jesus. Yes, still hard because we are human, but it is not a request! Jesus does not say, could you please try to love each other as I have loved you – no, he commands it. We MUST do it – however much we struggle and however many times we fail – remember that wonderful gift of repentance, and the even more unique gift of forgiveness?

We are not part of an old way, we are part of the new way... we are part of Gods new plan. We are part of Gods new vision – and we too need vision – for ourselves, for this church, for the people of Handsworth and for Gods plan. Start with prayer, pray for vision and ask God for guidance, for behold, He DOES make all things new. Amen.