

Easter 5 Sunday 15 May 2022

Acts of the Apostles 11.1-18

(Revelation 21.1-6)

John 13.31-35

This is a really short Gospel reading this morning, but nevertheless full of meaning and what might have been. The immediate reason for the first phrase “When therefore he had gone out, ...” is the departure of Judas Iscariot from the upper room where Jesus has celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples. He has referred to the bread as his body, the bread which he breaks and gives to them. As we know we are that body, we are “very members incorporate” in it, as we shall say in the (Book of Common Prayer) prayer of thanksgiving at the end of this service, and in Common Worship “may we who share Christ’s body live his risen life”.

Jesus has told Judas to “do quickly what you are going to do”, and Judas goes out. Although the other eleven disciples have no idea what he is going to do, Jesus himself of course does. So passes what must have been a moment of great tension for him. Supposing Judas had said “No, I’ve decided against it” or something like that, the outcome of everything would have been quite different. But Jesus does not cast him out, he goes of his own free will. We can imagine Jesus watching as the door closes behind Judas. This is God’s plan, so it happens, and it enables Jesus to say what he says next about the glorification of God and of himself.

Everything that happens after that is to demonstrate what kind of Messiah he is: “the Son of Man must suffer”, it is the way his kingdom will be inaugurated. God is love, and his glory consists in what most displays his love. The Passion to which Jesus has in effect condemned himself, by letting Judas go out, is the very focus of his glory and of humans as we are meant to be, of the Messiah who came to restore the divine image in us.

As we know, this episode is not the end, but the beginning of everything, starting with the Crucifixion, then the Resurrection, the Ascension and finally Pentecost. This is when a new power is to come upon the disciples, the power of the Holy Spirit which is continually available to us too, enabling us to draw closer to God as we make our way through the jungle of our daily lives. But this new power, the power of love demonstrated by Jesus, is unattainable for us unless we have placed our implicit trust in him.

We may think that this is similar to the second Commandment: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”. That stands, of course, as a general rule for our relationships with all our fellow human beings. But in these later verses 34-35 of our Gospel today Jesus is making it abundantly clear that he is talking of the special bond of love which should unite all Christians, as a mirror of the love of God in Christ for each of us. If we all behaved in this way, the power of such love would be irresistible.

You would expect therefore that an established Christian Church such as the Russian Orthodox Church would be reacting to recent events in Ukraine in a critical, but loving and compassionate way. On the contrary, statements from Patriarch Kirill, the head of that Church, have been laced with similar vitriol as President Putin has used to refer to Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. It may be that the hierarchy of that Church has been forcibly coordinated along the lines set out by the Russian government, along with the rest of civil society, or that they have been infuriated by the Ukrainian Church wanting to and succeeding in being accepted by the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul as an independent Church (independent of Moscow, that is). Whatever it is, it brings shame on all Christians to hear statements condemning Ukraine in such unloving terms.

However, we should be cautious about who we condemn: in 1914 the leaders of the Church of England were hardly complimentary in their attitude to Germany, the then Bishop of London declaring that it was a Christian duty to go and kill Germans.

So the old Commandment (to love our neighbour as ourselves) stands as a universal and too often neglected responsibility, as we know from our own lives, whereas this new Commandment “that you love one another as I have loved you” has a narrower focus and a more intense quality about it. As Christians, both individually and corporately, we are to set an example of selfless love, in honour of him who sacrificed his life in order that we might have life in all its abundance.

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