

Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 19th May 2019, Easter 5

Readings: **Acts 11:1-18**
Revelation 21:1-6

Psalm 148
John 13:31-35

Do you remember that old folk song by Pete Seeger, ‘Where have all the flowers gone?’ It’s easy to play, and it’s easy to sing, but it suggests something profound. It suggests that human beings, human organisations, and human societies are not very good at learning from history! For those not familiar with the song each questioning verse gives an answer, which flows into the next questioning verse and answer, which flows into the next questioning verse and answer... until we’re back to the original question!

So, the question ‘Where have all the flowers gone?’ is answered by the affirmation that they’ve gone to young girls. ‘Where have all the young girls gone?’ Is answered by the affirmation that they’ve gone to young men. The... young men have gone to soldiers; soldiers have gone to graveyards; graveyards have gone to flowers; and back to, ‘Where have all the flowers gone?’ the cycle starts over again.

The questioning refrain after each verse asks rhetorically, ‘When will we ever learn? When will we ever learn?’ When will we resolve conflict differently? How will we resolve conflict differently?

Of course when we hear the lyrics we can think of past and present conflicts. We can bring to mind World Wars and Civils Wars, and the ongoing conflicts that exist in many countries.

In many ways conflict and disagreement is part of being human. We disagree with each other, and seek a way forward that may mean one view is regarded as better than the other, it may mean negotiating a hybrid version of two views, or even discovering a completely new way of proceeding – even the best possible way of proceeding. A way forward that would not have become evident unless there had been vigorous disagreement, and robust discussion!

We experience disagreement in couple relationships, in families, between friends, and in work places. It would therefore be very strange if there was not also disagreement sometimes within churches, and between church members, for we do not park our humanity at the door when we come into church. Indeed it’s encouraging when we find some record of conflict in the sacred writing of our faith because we can identify with what was going on, and potentially learn from how they worked it out.

In the reading from Acts this week (Acts 11:1-18), there was significant tension and disagreement between the leaders of the early Church because Peter had been spending time with people who were not Jewish. Looking back from our perspective this may not seem like a very big deal, but we can helpfully think of this as a watershed moment in the life of the early Church.

Part of Jewish identity, then and now, is to keep the religious rules described in Leviticus and Deuteronomy about food. The thought is that by eating kosher food people can live closely aligned with God. So, Jews then and now are not permitted to eat whatever they want, and even permitted foods must be prepared in a special way. For example the only animals designated by the Torah as kosher are those that have cloven hooves and which regurgitate their food. The most commonly eaten kosher animals are cows and lambs, but even these must be ritually killed. So, Jews then, and now, are not supposed to eat meat that

has been killed by hunting because it has not been ritually killed. They are also not allowed to products like salami that use animal blood, or any form of shell fish.

The argument was clear – according to the word of God in the Torah – God ‘said’ that the Jewish community should follow these strict rules. If you kept the rules it helped you to live a holy life, but if you did not then somehow you were less pure... even, impure.

Now the earliest believers in Jesus were considered to be a Jewish sect known as the followers of The Way. They believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that they were called to help other Jews understand this. But, thankfully for all of us – God had a much bigger vision, and we are told that Peter had a glimpse of this at Joppa!

We read in Acts that Peter had a vision while he was praying and in this he heard God challenging him to kill and eat food that a Jewish person was forbidden to eat. And just to make sure Peter got the message he experienced the vision twice. God telling him to engage in behaviour that would make him impure and unworthy according to the sacred writing of his Jewish faith, and God saying, ‘What God has made clean, you should not profane.’

Hot on the heels of these visions Peter was invited to visit a family in Caesarea who were not Jewish. A family unfamiliar with the religious teaching of the Torah. A family in which the males were not circumcised. And, a family who ate many kinds of non-kosher food. Peter spoke to them about Jesus and to his astonishment the Holy Spirit came upon that gathered family, in the same way that it had come upon the first disciples of Jesus who were Jewish.

Surely, God was doing a new thing, and amazingly the Church leaders in Jerusalem recognised this, and accepted it. If they had not – then it’s interesting to think what might have happened. If they had insisted that Jesus was just for the Jewish community – the chosen people of God – history would have been different. If they had insisted that people who came to faith in Jesus had to follow the Jewish religious practices of circumcision and kosher food – history would have been different.

I think the reason they were persuaded was that Peter, Paul and others could clearly see the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of these people who were different to themselves. These Gentiles that had no Jewish background at all.

Now one the challenges for us from this reading is to ask whether God continues to do new things in our time, or were the new things just for long ago? Are we like those members of the early Church in Jerusalem who think we’ve got a pretty good handle on what God wants or doesn’t want, and struggle when people suggest that our understanding is limited, or that in fact God is doing something new?

I think the litmus test then – and now – is to discern how the Holy Spirit is present in the lives of those we consider other, and our open to the Holy Spirit in our own life.

Let’s pray...

God of grace and love, we give thanks for the work of your Spirit in the lives of all who follow you. We offer you our hearts and minds, and pray that you help us see people through your eyes. We pray for wisdom and love in the name of the one who calls us to follow, Jesus the risen Christ. Amen.