



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fifth Sunday of Easter

readings: [Acts 11.1-18](#), [Revelation 21.1-6](#), [John 13.31-35](#)

15th May 2022

Some of you will recall a TV advert for a national newspaper. It shows first a skinhead running down a street and pushing a man aside violently. A voice over says, 'An event seen from one point of view gives one impression. Seen from another point of view it gives quite a different impression. Its only when you get the whole picture you can fully understand what is going on.' And then you see a re-run of the first event from a different angle, showing the skinhead running to save the man from a pallet of bricks falling from scaffolding above!

Seeing the whole picture is important and it's important for us as we engage with our readings this morning.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter reports back to unhappy and disgruntled colleagues in Jerusalem. What is this they have heard about Peter, one of key apostles of the risen Jesus, who had eaten with gentiles, breaking the purity laws of Israel? They needed to see the whole picture to understand what was going on.

For Peter it was a life-changing experience. 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality', Peter explains. We might even say that for Peter it was a conversion as his whole understanding of who could be a member of the community of the risen Jesus radically altered.

If for Peter it was a conversion then for those who were brought into God's people – the Roman household, relatives and close friends, it was a drawing in, a becoming part of God's people. It was a 'gentile Pentecost' as the Holy Spirit fills the life of this gentile household just as it filled the Jewish people who gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost itself.

The disciples in Jerusalem had only seen one side of Peter's story. They needed to hear about the activity of the Spirit who in the early church was fulfilling God's mission, rushing ahead of the disciples, doing new things, bringing to birth God's people in a new way. As always, the disciples were catching up with what God in his Spirit was already doing, trying to make sense of the Spirit's initiative.

The God who lives in the life of the Trinity is a God of diversity – he creates diversity, gathers diversity, revealing the diversity at the heart of God's own being.

God was in the business of expanding the horizons of Peter and the believers in Jerusalem. They needed to learn that God's new community around the living and risen Jesus, brought about by the work of the Spirit was inclusive; no one excluded from God's love. God's new community crosses boundaries between peoples and ethnic groups, explodes traditional prejudices and is unequivocally for all.

Seeing the whole picture is also important in St John's Gospel. The reading interrupts the Last Supper. The meal is finishing and Judas steps out into the night, into the place of darkness from which he would betray Jesus and bring about the catastrophic events of Good Friday. It's at that point that Jesus, a light shining brightly in the darkness of betrayal begins what we call his 'farewell discourse' to the disciples that remain.

The wider picture is of Jesus' final hours of freedom, darkness all around him, the heaviness of the hour producing words both brief and with deep meaning. At the heart of what Jesus says is God's vision of the community the disciples would form after Jesus' departure. The countdown to the 'little longer' has begun.

Jesus' vision of this community is based on love. He is saying: 'if you wish to live your life together in unity with me and with my Father, then it's about living your life in, though and with love. The one who believes is loved by the Son and by the Father and returns that love. This love is expressed in obedience, in keeping my commandment, which is the new commandment of love.'

In the background was the commandment to celebrate the Eucharist as an expression of God's love revealed in Jesus. As members of God's community, we are to love each other and enact a sign of God's love in the breaking of bread and the pouring out of wine, so others will know about the risen Jesus and be drawn to this new community.

We are given two views of the Christian community – one that is actively reaching out, crossing boundaries to include and embrace others, and one that emphasises the importance of getting the inward relationships within the community right so that others may see the presence of Jesus in this world.

Like the advert, we must see the whole picture. We need to hold together the church's need to respond to new situations and to proclaim afresh to each generation the good news of the risen Christ, with Jesus' words about the ethic of love.

And one of the great challenges that we face in our generation is about community and the place of love.

Even before the pandemic research in the United States suggested three in five adults considered themselves lonely. In the UK, government appointed a minister for loneliness four years ago. One in eight of us have said that we do not have a close friend to confide in. Three quarters of us do not know the name of our neighbours and 60% of people say they are lonely at work.

Those who research these things tell us that it's more than just feeling a lack of personal contact with others – it's about a broader feeling of loneliness that means that we feel cut off, isolated from the democratic process, that we feel powerless and lack a voice in the way things are or could become. There is little doubt that the effect of the pandemic and the increasing digitisation of our lives that has exacerbated the direction of travel.

One of my favourite writers is Alain de Botton. He has written a book called *Religion for Atheists*. Alain De Botton is an atheist himself yet thinks that faith and religion has much to offer to these sorts of questions. On the one hand he believes that religion is outmoded, superstitious, and unsustainable. But he also believes that many of the problems we face in today's world can be addressed by the solutions put forward by religion to human living.

Community is one example. The creation of community is one of the gifts of religion to the world and needs to be re-discovered. The loss of a sense of community is one of the features of contemporary life.

Alain de Botton explores whether the idea and practice of community, the forming of deep connections with each other, can be reclaimed and his answer is yes, but only if we attend to the question of love. But even the concept of love needs rescuing. He says:

In the lonely canyons of the modern city, there is no more honoured emotion than love. However, this is not the love of which religions speak, not the expansive, universal brotherhood of mankind, it is a more jealous, restricted and ultimately meaner variety. It is a romantic love which sends us on a maniacal quest for a single person with whom we hope to achieve a life-long and complete communion.

There is nothing wrong with the idea of romantic love, of course, except that in today's world it is so often distorted by a self-serving individualism. The point is being made that love as a way of relating between human beings, love as a public way of behaving, has been lost. We need to rediscover in love the attitude of mutual respect and regard, the putting of others first, the patience with those who are weak and vulnerable, and the importance of self-sacrifice – things that are evident in a religious understanding of community. This is the sort of love that Jesus is pointing his people towards. In the dynamic of a church that always needs to reach out to the world in each generation to reclaim the understanding of love.

People like Alain de Botton add to our confidence that faith and religion still has a vital role to play in society, helping each and every human being, whether they attend church or not, to glimpse, understand and even experience what it is to be in relationship with others through community.

We are coming up to our AGM which is to be held in two weeks time after the main service. It's going to be a time to remind ourselves of the basics of this cathedral's mission and ministry to the city of Derby and the county of Derbyshire. It will be a moment to take stock and to think together about what it means for our cathedral community to reach out and embrace the peoples of this city and this diocese of Derby. To proclaim afresh God's purpose for human beings, responding to the needs of our time.

One of my roles in the city is to chair the new Faiths Alliance Steering Group. This is a place where all Derby's faith communities in our diversity are invited to come together and explore how we can work in partnership with each other and with local authorities. I am involved and devote time and energy to that public role because I believe that faith is a vital resource for human flourishing, that faith groups can come together with secular organisations and institutions to find solutions to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century such as loneliness, such as community, such as participation, helping us all live out a social ethic based on love.

No one organisation or institution has the answer to difficult questions about how we live together, or has the right to impose solutions, yet I believe by working together, each organisation and person, bringing particular skills and insights participates in God's work of making all things new, to take words from the Book of Revelation, and giving humanity a glimpse of the kingdom of God

As we gather to celebrate the presence of the risen Jesus amongst us in the Eucharist, so we offer a sign to the world of what it is to be fully alive as a human being in relationship with others, showing how a Christian understanding of love can make a difference to each and every person.

We offer the sign of God's love humbly, knowing that we do not always get it right as an institution and that we sometimes need to ask each other and those who view us from afar for forgiveness. But we also offer the sign of God's love confidently knowing that it is the Jesus who died and rose again for us who lives amongst us, brings us the hope of eternal life through God's same love.

The Very Rev'd Dr Peter Robinson