

# The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 10.44—48

1 John 5.1-6

John 15.9—17

The desire for certainty goes very deep, and all of today's readings look at that longing with sympathy, though the answers they give are as challenging as they are reassuring.

In the Gospel, Jesus is at last giving his disciples 'commandments'. If the disciples have been listening to Jesus throughout the weeks and months before this, they must have some inkling already about how Jesus interprets God's commandments to his people. Underlying the great commandments given by God to Moses is the imperative that his people should show by their lives what their God is like. This commandment Jesus has fulfilled utterly. Through all his life he has kept the commandment to love God, be loved by God and to show God's love, and that is the commandment that he now passes on to his disciples.

If the commandments given to Moses have proved difficult to interpret and fulfil, then Jesus's retelling of them has proved even harder. How do we know if we have fulfilled this great command to love one another? The example that Jesus gives, of his own willingness to die for his friends, is not a comforting one. Is that, then, to be the measure of love? Well, the Gospel suggests, it may need to be sometimes. But the verses that directly follow the giving of this commandment suggest that there are other interim measures too. One is the insistent changing of roles that is so characteristic of Jesus's teaching. 'I have called you friends', he says, 'because I have made known to you everything that I heard from my Father.' The sharing that characterizes Father and Son is extended to us. We are not simply issued with instructions that we must follow without needing to understand them. Instead we are invited to God's table, to eat and discuss and share in his great plan for the world. So one mark of our 'love' for one another and God will presumably be our willingness to extend this invitation to others. 'Come and join us at God's table, come and help us to work out with God what to do next.' If God makes friends, not servants, so should Christians. The second measure of our success at 'loving' that these verses suggest is 'bearing fruit'. Bringing others to share in the life and love of God will make us more loving. Anyone who has had any experience in Christian evangelism, whether in word or deed or both, would I think agree with that. It is deeply challenging and enlarging to see the word of God at work in the lives of others, and to see that before you and your feeble attempt at love got anywhere near the situation, God's love was already at work.

That is certainly the experience of Peter and his hearers as they watch Cornelius and his household respond to the love of God. They hear these strangers praising God long before they have gone through all the proper forms, and they realize that their own love for the Gentiles has been much smaller than God's. If they were looking for certainty about the next step in relation to the Gentiles, then they are given it abundantly. They see the Holy Spirit poured out with unmistakable power — and notice that that power is proved not just by the use of tongues, but by the praise of God. Of course, the certainty experienced by these witnesses is not easily transmitted to those who weren't present, as you will discover if you read the next chapter of Acts or Paul's letter to the Galatians.

1 John combines both love and the Holy Spirit in its explanation of Christian certainty. Like the Gospel, 1 John suggests that the commandment we are given — the thing we have to do to know that we are in the right — is to love God and love each other. Like Acts, it suggests that it is the Holy Spirit rather than our own innate discernment that leads us to spot the love of God at work. 1 John also reintroduces the sombre note of suffering sounded by the Gospel. The cross of Christ is not a past thing that has been superseded by the praise, joy and certainty of the Spirit. The Spirit witnesses constantly to the truth of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus which, in its totality, is the way of God's victory in the world.

Today's readings imply that certainty comes through sharing our faith, praising God and loving one another. Each one of those activities makes the others more and more possible and natural, and brings us closer and closer to the life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

*Jane Williams  
from Lectionary Reflections*

### Prayer

God our redeemer,  
you have delivered us from the power of darkness  
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:  
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,  
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
Amen