

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Genesis 22.1—18

Acts 11.1—18

John 13.31—35

The verses from St John's Gospel come at the turning point of the Last Supper. Judas has just left the room, and there is now no going back. A sense of urgency seems to overtake Jesus after this. The supper is over, and Jesus begins to talk, to explain, as though trying to make the disciples understand at last, to impress upon them some of the things that they should already know. But whenever one of the disciples does speak in the verses that follow today's reading, it is only to demonstrate how puzzled they are, and how little they understand, even at this late hour.

The two themes of today's reading from John are related, and are characteristic of all of John's writing. First of all, now that Judas has gone about his business, and the cross is inescapable, Jesus speaks of glorification. In all of John's writing, the cross is the moment of illumination, when God is to be seen in Christ and Christ is to be seen in God. Second, Jesus talks about love, the new commandment that he gives to his disciples. The themes are connected because what is revealed in the cross is the love of God in Christ. In the cross we see that love is the whole nature of God in his dealings with us. The commandment to love is not exactly new. Most of the Old Testament law is designed to make Israel a loving community, that will treat its members and those who come in contact with it with justice and care. But here in John's Gospel the connection is made explicit and unavoidable. Just as Jesus shows us the nature of God, so we are called to show others that same nature. Just as Israel was designed to be a community that showed the nature of its God, so Jesus' followers are called to be a community from which the love of God, God's very

nature, shines out.

So what is this love that we are called to receive and transmit? It is, apparently, the love that Jesus has shown to us, his followers. We are to reflect back what we have received and, in doing that, we will be reflecting the God whom we believe in. We will be restoring his image in ourselves, by making ourselves like the Son. We were created in God's image, and now we are to be restored in that image again, by showing the love of the Father and the Son. This great 'new commandment' can fill us with a great sense of hopelessness and failure, if we do not read John carefully. We know that we are wholly incapable of showing the love of God, but this commandment is given to disciples who don't seem to understand a word Jesus is saying, and who are shortly going to betray him. Jesus' love for his disciples is utterly realistic. He knows the kind of people he has chosen, then and now. They are ordinary, fallible. To these people,

Jesus entrusted and continues to entrust himself and his message. They are worthy because they are loved. That is the Christian disciple's only qualification for the great task we are given.

In the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and in Peter's attempt to explain why he is admitting Gentiles to fellowship, we see people struggling to understand and show the love of God. Abraham has learned two very important things that most of us never learn in a lifetime: that God comes first, beyond anything else; and that however much we think we love our family or our friends, God loves them more. Abraham knows that God is to be trusted, even when he cannot understand what God is doing. And he trusts God because God is trusting him. God is making Abraham a part of his great purpose of salvation for the world, and Abraham has come close enough to God to know that you cannot bargain about salvation. You cannot say, 'Yes, please, I'll have the salvation, but I won't give anything in return.' Peter, too, has learned enough about God to recognize the signs of his presence, however unlikely and unpredicted. And so he becomes the means whereby God's salvation comes to Cornelius and his household.

Knowing that we are loved and trusted by God is the beginning of fulfilling this new commandment. We do not have to generate this love ourselves, because it is given to us. Christians are, most fundamentally, people who know that God is love, and we know it, not because we are better at loving than anyone else, but because we know that God has loved us and trusted us, even before we were either lovely or trustworthy.

*Jane Williams
from "Lectionary Reflections"*

Prayer

Almighty God,
who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ
have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life:
grant that, as by your grace going before us
 you put into our minds good desires,
so by your continual help
we may bring them to good effect;
through Jesus Christ our risen Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen