Sermon for 5th of Easter Year C

Readings: Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35

i

Even the pope can get into hot water. For those whose immediate association of Peter is with the Petrine office, this passage must cause a little discomfort. Whether being criticised by some elements within the Church is the same thing as being accountable to them is a matter of debate. But what we do see here is Peter’s commitment to holding the Church together. He wants to bring everyone along with him. He too had been reluctant to accept gentiles as equals, so he can sympathise with their doubts.

The issue of circumcision was a complex one within the infant Christian community which swung back and forth for a while. Their theological dispute was also taking place against a backdrop of political Zionism in the lead up to the outbreak of three Jewish- Roman wars. Luke, a gentile, is acutely aware of what was at stake in this argument. Peter and the Apostles were in a difficult position.

Baptising Cornelius isn’t the problem. Extending the Christian Gospel to gentiles isn’t a problem. It was happening in Jesus’ day and Jesus himself ministered to gentiles on several occasions, most famously to the Syro-Phoenician in Mark 7:24-30. It was the **terms** on which gentiles could be admitted to the Church that was contentious.

**Eating** with the uncircumcised was what angered some of the Jerusalem church leaders. They expected the Jewish laws on circumcision and kosher food laws to be extended to gentile Christian converts. Baptism alone was not sufficient in their view.

Jesus had said that the new wine would require new wine skins. This is precisely the moment the Church is coming to grips with what that means.

How much is Christianity consistent with Judaism from which it has sprung and how much is it a breach and a new start? On the one extreme we have people such as some of those in Jerusalem and who dogged St Paul throughout his ministry who saw a strong continuity which included circumcision and kosher food and on the other extreme people like Marcion who said the whole OT should be ditched because the OT God was not even the same God as the God of Jesus Christ.

Wisely, the Church found a middle ground to occupy – stressing both the continuity with the OT and the discontinuity of the New Covenant established by Christ. However, it took several decades to settle the matter.

What Peter demonstrates here is that the Church’s unity is at stake. Gentiles must be accepted as fully equal partners in the Gospel because they have received the same Holy Spirit upon believing in the Risen Christ as the Jewish Apostles received upon their first believing (Acts 11:17) – irrespective of circumcision or food laws.

So if the food laws and circumcision play no part in the gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit that suggests the old food laws and circumcision are no longer relevant for Jewish Christians either. This is St Paul’s opinion too.

There must be no second class Christians of those baptised but not circumcised.

There is another aspect to this also. The Church’s unity requires that Peter needs to persuade all the Apostles what he has done is acceptable.

Returning to the matter of Petrine ministry, whatever our take on the papal office today, we do see Luke depicting Peter in this crucial role of leading the Church into new territory and also holding the Church together as he does so. Both aspects are crucial – taking the Gospel to all the nations and holding the Church together in the process.

Paul had much greater freedom to dispense with circumcision and the food laws among the gentile communities where he ministered, where Judaism had always been a small minority, but the politics of Jerusalem made it much more difficult there.

In Jerusalem the zealot party was growing in influence and at the time of Paul’s First Missionary Journey a civil war broke out between Jews and Samaritans. So the Jerusalem based Christian leaders had to bear in mind the volatile and rather dangerous zealot party. To be seen to be too anti-Jewish by abandoning circumcision would have left the Jerusalem Christians in a potentially precarious position.

The year after the civil war and Paul’s First Missionary Journey, the Council of Jerusalem is understandably cautious to make such an obvious breach with Judaism (Acts 15).

When Paul again visits Jerusalem after his Third Missionary Journey, Jerusalem is so full of zealot sympathisers that Paul is arrested in the temple for his own safety, thus starting on his long journey into captivity and towards Rome.

Whilst Paul is under house arrest in Rome, the Roman procurator of Jerusalem dies suddenly and before his replacement can arrive the high priest has James II, the Christian leader, stoned to death.

It is this event that brings to a close the appeasement policy in Jerusalem favouring circumcision to keep on the right side of the zealots. Peter too flees Palestine at this time and joins Paul in Rome (Acts 28.30). Peter now abandons any flirtation with James’ pro-circumcision and pro-food laws policy, such he had shown briefly in Galatians 2:12. Peter’s ministry had been predominantly to the Jews (Gal 2:8) and so he did have to go along with James’ policy even after speaking and acting against it with Cornelius, but once out of the cauldron of Jerusalem, Peter remained firmly in the Pauline camp – believing entry by baptism alone sufficed for all.

Meanwhile, Jerusalem slid further into the hands of Zionist zealots and within 3-4 years of Peter leaving, the first of three Jewish-Roman Wars breaks out, resulting in Jews being banished from Jerusalem, but Christians allowed in to a ruined city and a temple which, as Jesus had predicted, barely had one single stone left in place (Matthew 24:2).

ii

At the centre of this new development to include gentiles is the Holy Spirit.

Peter’s account stresses his own reluctance to make such a radical change. He also points out that it was the Holy Spirit’s initiative – sending him into a trance and giving him the vision of the unclean animals lowered down from above. Peter identifies the voice commanding him to “kill and eat” as that of the Lord (Acts 11:8).

This was Peter’s Damascus Road experience.

Like Paul’s dramatic encounter – it was Christ himself who takes the initiative and leads the reluctant Apostle in a new direction.

Peter’s vision was confirmed when the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his gentile household. Peter also adds that he took 6 people with him from Joppa – thus giving him more than enough witnesses as well as strength in numbers against those in Jerusalem who oppose his actions.

It was also divine initiative for Cornelius himself, having been instructed by an angel to send for Simon Peter.

This pattern has been replicated in so many ways down the centuries. Christ takes hold of people, sometimes against their inclination, to show them some new way. Stories of the saints are full of dramatic encounters, changes of direction, new insights, revolutionary new ways. Saints Augustine, Benedict, Francis, Bernard, the fathers of the Reformation and our own John Wesley with his “strangely warmed heart” all bear testimony to the same Spirit at work in different ways across the cultures and across the years.

Christian Unity may actually reside in the Spirit.

On the one hand, Peter’s effort to persuade the Jerusalem Christians to accept his action at Caesarea shows how important it is to maintain the visible bonds of unity and fellowship within the Church. Our ecumenical challenge to mend a divided Church must go on.

Yet on the other hand, whatever our visible disunity in ecclesiological structure and doctrinal framework, we share a deeper unity that is unbroken because we share in one baptism, one Spirit and one Lord.

In the days of Wesley the rift between Protestant and Catholic ran deeper than today. Despite the mistrust and ill feeling of the time, Wesley acknowledged a deeper unity in the Spirit that took precedence for him over differences of opinion. So wherever Wesley encountered Christians in a genuine search for a holy life, he acknowledged them as fellow travellers, whatever their Church and doctrinal background. That was quite enlightened and ecumenical for his day.

Wesley believed that it was the work of the Holy Spirit to raise up a people called Methodist. That remains our only justification for existence today: is the Spirit still calling us to be here and what is the nature of the commission laid upon our shoulders?

iii

In our readings today we also see that unity and love go together. In John 13 the New Commandment is to love one another.

In Acts 11 we see Peter putting that into practice when he accepts Cornelius into the Church.

Love is not the fuzzy feeling we normally mean when we say that we love someone. Such affection or attraction does not have to be present in order to love others in the Christian sense of love, or Agape.

Peter did not love Cornelius in the fuzzy feeling sense, but he did love him in the agape sense. Agape love is the acknowledgement that you are wholly committed to one another because you share in a common relationship with Christ.

Since both clearly belong to Christ as the gift of the Holy Spirit to Cornelius proves, Peter cannot ignore him whatever his previous inclinations. Agape love is about obediently acknowledging the new relationships and mutual obligations that exist once we belong to Christ which supersedes world divisions of ethnicity, gender, class or wealth.

The passage about the New Commandment appears between the betrayal by Judas and the denial by Peter. Despite the worst behaviours Christians can exhibit in their discipleship, we are still commanded to love one another – to hold together – to accept one another – to witness to the world the reconciling Spirit of Christ who is upon us.

The fact that the Holy Spirit has been granted to those who annoy us, frustrate and bewilder us, does not entitle us to walk away from our fellow Christian. If a brother or sister is acceptable to the Lord, who are we to judge they are unacceptable to us? As Peter said (v17), “It is clear that God gave those Gentiles the same Spirit that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ; who was I, then, to try to stop God?”

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