

**Sermon for Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon  
May 17th, 2009**

**Acts 10:44-48**

**1 John 5:1-6**

**John 15:9-17**

Then Peter said: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Let us pray: “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.” Amen.

In today’s gospel reading we hear the commandment that’s at the centre of Christian life. ‘Love one another as I have loved you’, Jesus says, and gives us the core obligation of Christian discipleship. How are we to live as Christians? We’re to love each other as Christ loves us. The idea of keeping God’s commandments would be familiar to the Jewish disciples to whom Jesus was speaking, but Jesus isn’t talking about the Ten Commandments. The only commandment given, the only one that matters, is love. This is the most simple and the most difficult instruction in the entire Bible. Simple – because it’s so easy to understand. Difficult – because of the nature of the love that’s asked of us, and because of who we’re asked to love.

What does love look like? Jesus tells us: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”. And he says this on the last night that he will spend with the disciples, on the night that he washes his disciples’ feet, on the night before his death on the cross. Jesus tells the disciples what love is – and he shows them that love in action. It’s simple to say that the core of Christian life is love; but it’s incredibly difficult for us to love each other as Jesus has loved us, with sacrificial, serving love. And yet this is what we are called to do. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

If we obey this commandment, we are no longer Jesus’ servants. The Christian community is made up of the *friends* of Christ. The question of who is included in this friendship is asked in today’s reading from Acts, in the story of Cornelius and Peter. To understand the extract we hear today, we need to remember the background story. Cornelius is a Gentile, a Roman centurion, and a man who gives alms and prays constantly to God. One day he has a vision; an angel comes to him and tells him to send to Joppa for a certain Simon, called Peter. So Cornelius sends some of his servants. The next day, while they’re on the road, Peter is sitting on the roof of a house, waiting for food to be prepared. He has a vision. In the words of Acts: “He saw the heaven opened and something like a sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter: kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ Then the voice said to him again, a second time. ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times.”

As Peter is pondering the meaning of this vision, Cornelius’ servants arrive. The Spirit tells Peter to go with them without hesitation, for the Spirit has sent them. He returns with them to Caesarea. When Peter arrives at Cornelius’ house, he realises the meaning of his vision of the food, and he tells the many people who have gathered there: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” Peter proclaims to them Christ’s life, death and resurrection. At this point today’s reading begins, for as Peter is speaking the Holy Spirit is poured out on the Gentiles listening.

From our perspective, looking back with 2000 years of hindsight, the moral of this story, the universality of the Christian faith, is obvious. But it was very far from obvious for Peter and the circumcised believers who accompanied him. We need to remember that the Jewish people were living under occupation, constantly under pressure to give up their unique identity and become good members of the Roman Empire. The dietary laws, the refusal to associate with the Gentiles, circumcision, these are matters of survival for the Jews. To give them up is to give up their very identity. And yet this is what the Jewish Christians are called to do. The Holy Spirit is leading the Jewish Christians to face their own

prejudices about who is in and who is out. Soon into the life of the early Church, the Church is being asked to make a radical change.

Change is rarely easy. Most of us prefer to remain as we are, in our comfort zone. But change is part of being Christian. The Holy Spirit is always leading us to do new things. We are always being called to change and grow into becoming the people that God created us to be. The *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church actually prays that God will continue to change us: “The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God’s eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord.” The commandment to “love one another” demands that we make any changes that are necessary in our life to enable us to love better. The invitation to be Jesus’ friends demands that we welcome outsiders and strangers into friendship with us and with God. This may mean making changes in our life as radical as not following dietary laws, or associating with Gentiles, or not demanding circumcision, were for the Jewish Christians. But as Peter says: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality”.

In today’s epistle reading John writes that “The love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” Sometimes the command to love others as Christ has loved us can be extremely burdensome, when we find ourselves in community with people we don’t like or disagree with or who are just not like us. I’m sure that the circumcised believers who accompanied Peter found the command to welcome Gentiles into the Christian community by baptism extremely difficult. But this is the demand of Christian discipleship. This is what we are all called to do; this is how we are all called to live. And exactly because this is Christ’s command, we don’t have to do it by ourselves. We are able to love with the strength of knowing that we are loved by God. There will always be times when people hurt or anger or frighten us, and loving them seems impossible, but we’re *still* called to love them as we are loved, and from the absolute and utter joy of knowing that we are loved by God, we can love others. This is how we live out our faith. Jesus said: “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” May God help us always to obey this commandment. Amen.