

**Sermon for Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon
Easter 5, 2 May 2010**

John 13:31-35

Acts 11:1-18

Revelation 21:1-6

The Christian faith has a dual personality. On the one hand, the church is an ancient institution, drawing on thousands of years of history. At the beginning of every service the Scriptures are solemnly carried into the worship space, in recognition that it's through them, words written thousands of years ago, that we hear the Word of God. We draw on prayers prayed by Jews and Christians throughout the centuries when making our own prayers, and we repeat rituals established by the first Christians when we celebrate the Eucharist. We do all this because we know that God has been present in human history from the very beginning, and that in Jesus God decisively intervened in human history in one particular time and place. We live in a culture that values the new over the old, that demands innovation and finds repetition boring. And yet the church persists in telling the same old stories and following the same old liturgical cycle year-in and year-out, as Advent leads to Christmas, and Lent prepares us for Easter, and the same stories of Jesus' life are told throughout Ordinary Time. The church knows the value of memory and tradition.

At the same time, Christianity is the faith of the new, open to the radical change. Memory and tradition are not valued for their own sake; nothing is sacred merely because it's old. Tradition is only valued because it promotes our relationship with God; and today's readings show us that God is as much a God of innovation as of tradition.

In these weeks after Easter we hear extracts from the Revelation to John, and today's reading promises us that at the end of time everything will be made new, that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth will pass away, and the sea will be no more.¹ (The sea will be no more because for the people of Israel the sea was terrifying chaos, the home of sea-monsters and death. This is just one of many ways that we can tell that the author of the Book of Revelation wasn't Australian.) All things will be made new because God is both Alpha and Omega, beginning and end.

It's not just at the end of time that we'll see God doing a new thing. The Acts of the Apostles describe the birth of a new community, the church. This newness was not without challenge. Last year, the lectionary gave us the story of Peter's encounter with the Gentile Cornelius. This year, we hear that story repeated, as Peter's defence of his actions to the community in Judea. The story is repeated in Acts because what Peter had done was so scandalous – and so important. From our perspective, looking back with 2000 years of hindsight, the moral of the story of the baptism of Cornelius and his household, the universality of the Christian faith, is obvious. But it was very far from obvious for Peter and the circumcised believers who accompanied him to Cornelius, or for those of the circumcision who were in Judea. Their first reaction was criticism.

It's interesting that their question of Peter was not: "why did you baptise Gentiles?", but: "why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" It's almost as though the party of the circumcision thought that there was room for some sort of arrangement in which Jews and Gentiles could both accept Jesus as Lord, as long as they did that separately and didn't socialise together. That sort of arrangement hasn't been unknown in Christian history – we've seen it in places like South Africa under Apartheid or the United States before the Civil Rights movement. But Peter's vision of food says otherwise; as he tells Cornelius "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."² This is the message he now shares with the circumcised believers in Jerusalem, sneakily calling on the six circumcised brothers who accompanied him as witnesses. He tells them of his vision, and of the work of the Holy Spirit, and he ends with a rhetorical question that silences his hearers: "who was I that I could hinder God?"³

By the end of Peter's explanation his hearers are astounded at what God has revealed to and through him. This is one of most important moments in the history of the church, the point at which Christianity becomes available to those who have not been either born Jews or converted to Judaism. This

¹ Rev 21:1.

² Acts 10:28.

³ Acts 11:17.

is the moment when, through visions, experience, and the working of the Holy Spirit, Christians learn just how wide and inclusive God's salvation is.

Peter only calls on his memory of Jesus' words after everything has happened: "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" The words he recalls Jesus saying were directed at the time to Jesus' Jewish followers: Peter understands them as relevant to Gentiles, too, because of his own experience. Understanding God's message and purpose is not, here, a matter of simply reading the Scriptures. When God does something new, it can take time and visions and discussion within the community, as well as the searching of the Scriptures for this newness to be confirmed. As Peter and the community in Jerusalem discover here, it isn't as easy as reading and following the law.

God's capacity for doing something new, the Holy Spirit's tendency to breathe where She will, doesn't mean that we've been left without guidance, any more than Peter was. Peter could accept the new inclusivity that led to the baptism of Cornelius and his household because he knew that those who follow Jesus are under a new commandment; one that challenges all the usual ways that society organises itself. The new commandment, the sign that still identifies Jesus' disciples today, is that we love one another as he has loved us.

Throughout his life Jesus demonstrated the love of the new commandment. On the very evening that he gave it, Jesus had washed the disciples' feet, a task appropriate for the lowliest servant, and much too lowly for an adult Jewish man. Jesus went on to demonstrate the extent of his love in his death on the cross. It's a love that unites us with God, as we enter into the relationship of love between God and Jesus. Fortunately for us, this love isn't warm feelings, which can be impossible to command, it's love seen in committed action. It's a love that unites Christians to one another and identifies us to the world.

Christianity is a faith of innovation as well as tradition; in relationship with a God who makes all things new, who does new things. As we seek to listen to God in the confusion of our lives we might find the Spirit prodding us into new directions, as Peter found himself baptising a household of Gentiles. This can be frightening, and such changes can lead to criticism and questioning from today's equivalent of the "circumcised believers". But as long as we remember that at the centre of our faith is the overwhelming breadth and height and depth of God's love, as long as any changes we make are based on the love shown in the life of Jesus, we'll be okay. We'll be able to join with the circumcised believers in praising God, and saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles [us!] the repentance that leads to life." Amen.