

## **Sixth Sunday of Easter Year B**

We are now in the Easter Season, which continues until Pentecost.

### **Acts 10:44-48**

In the world after the resurrection, surprises come thick and fast. The new Jesus movement was peopled exclusively by Jews whose mindset was still dominated by the notion that God's favour was in some sense limited to their own people. The idea that Gentiles too could receive God's blessings – even God's blessings in Christ – took them completely by surprise. And what was it that convinced them? It was the clear evidence that the blessings of Pentecost could touch Gentiles as well as Jews.

Here we find this evidence, in the form of a mixed group of people – some Jew, some Gentile – who were listening to Peter's preaching. The remarkable effects of Peter's preaching were seen to affect people of both kinds, indiscriminately. Those who were of the Jewish covenant were 'astounded' (NRSV) to find Gentiles sharing in the blessings.

Peter has a reputation for 'shooting from the hip', for acting in (sometimes) ill-considered haste. On this occasion his willingness to respond without hesitation to the promptings of evidence is seen to serve the Christian cause well. Imagine the consequences if Peter had decided instead to take the matter to a church committee for detailed consideration. Maybe the motion would have been referred back to a working party, which would seek detailed evidence, review the scriptural precedents and assess the balance of tradition. They would report to a later meeting, by which time the moment would have passed. How sad that would have been.

It is a reminder to all involved in church governance, that there are occasions when we must respond with acclamation to the movements of the Spirit, firmly close our Constitutions and our Canon Law.

### **Ps 98**

This psalm might have been written as a response to the story told in Acts 10. Let's hear it for God!

But the response is invited not only from the enthusiasts who would respond anyway, nor yet from the reluctant scholars who need to check the historical documentation. The invitation is not even limited to the vast throng of human onlookers. The entire world, its physical geography as well as its animal inhabitants, is invited to celebrate (verses 8, 9).

Why so? Verse 10 tells us why. At last God will bring an end to the caprice of nature. Order will prevail. It is almost an echo of the ancient creation myths in which God defeats the forces of disorder, chaos and misery.

## **1 John 5:1-6**

We have been following John's line of argument over recent weeks, and have found it 'interesting'. Here, once again, John provides us with words that look wonderfully reassuring, but on closer inspection turn out to have more to say than we might at first imagine.

In many ways (and like chapter 1 of this letter) this reads like an extension of the Farewell Discourse in chapters 13-16 of the Gospel. Themes of the identity between the Son and the Father, and, by extension, the disciple, reappear and are displayed from slightly different angles. For example, in verses 4 and 5, it is clear that to believe in Jesus as God's Son is what changes an individual's position and status completely. Those puzzled by the phrase 'God's Son', might care to ask what it might mean if read as a 'figure of speech' – a characteristic feature of Jesus' teaching style; we call them 'parables'. Here, such belief enables the believer to conquer the world. In other words, nothing in the world can overwhelm the new resurrection life that God has given, planted and nurtured.

## **John 15: 9-17**

As we approach the great (if somewhat perplexing) Christian festivals of Pentecost and Trinity, it is illuminating to re-read this fragment from John's record of Jesus' farewell discourse. Everything here points to a truly astonishing take on Jesus' mission, namely, that his purpose is to draw his followers into intimate relationship with God in the Holy Spirit – in short, to share in his own relationship with the Father. He describes that relationship as 'love' (verse 10) and 'joy' (verse 11).

In the second paragraph, verses 12-17, we see these Jesus beginning the task of working out principles in practical terms. Friendship, love and joy depend upon sharing objectives and sharing commitments. The distinction between the shepherd and the 'hireling' (chapter 10) comes to mind here. Friendship does not exclude action; love is not simply a warm feeling inside. The action, however, arises not because of 'orders', sealed or otherwise. It arises out of total harmony of mind, heart and purpose, of affection and will.

The consequence of harmony at this extraordinary level is that God's generosity is seen in all its abundance (verse 16).

One of the dangers of the emphasis on individual personal salvation which has pervaded the life of the church in recent centuries is a corresponding de-emphasis on community. I'm not suggesting that community has been entirely neglected; John Wesley was very dismissive of the notion of the 'solitary Christian'. The final verse of our Gospel reading points to mutual love within the Christian fellowship as being at the heart of what Jesus was trying to achieve.