

Sermon for 21.5.17

Today is the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter. And next Thursday we celebrate Ascension Day when the Lord ascends into heaven where his journey ends in the heart of the One whom he called his Father.

In all the Easter events, the passion the crucifixion the resurrection, the ascension, there is one continuing, unbroken steadfast characteristic that holds Easter events together- and that is, God's love.

This amazing love is reflected in the scriptures in what they proclaim and in the way they are written.

I believe this amazing love is witnessed in all the scriptures, yet in terms of the ministry of Jesus and the beginning of the church, we particularly witness it in the continuity that flows from the gospel of Luke into the book of Acts.

In these two books we witness the ministry of Jesus, the Easter events and what takes place after.

From the books we learn where we have come from, in terms of Jesus mission on earth, and how we are to proceed into the future. The continuity provides the sense of an ongoing beginning rather than one of ending.

The two books (Luke and Acts) are not so much separate books that tell independent stories, but two tightly meshed instalments of one comprehensive history of Christ and his continuing presence in the church in the world through the Holy Spirit.

Delving into the story in terms of the power of God's accompanying love, – we notice that after the death and resurrection of Christ, the disciples obey the risen Lord and linger in Jerusalem even when persecution had scattered the rest of the community.

As a consequence, the church is ultimately formed.

It is a worthwhile exercise, I believe, to read the books Luke and Acts together for then we may see better the cohesive power of love in the guiding, accompanying and forming of what was to eventuate.

We hear this morning from Acts and the courage of Paul who witnessed to the love of God through Christ. Paul stood in front of the Areopagus, a hill near the Acropolis in Athens. It was a place where people gathered to espouse ideas, thoughts and philosophies. Paul would have known that his audience would be hard to win over – for they were more taken up with their own philosophies rather than Paul's theology.

But Paul courted his audience by referring to their own stoic philosophy. "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. – You have an altar in reverence to the Unknown God."

After Paul says this he then takes them on a journey to the known God through the Risen Lord.

We hear also this morning from the first letter of Peter. Along with Acts this letter is also read in services during the Easter season, for it proclaims the ideal of Christian community.

In the letter Peter reminds us we are to be united in mind. We are not to return evil for evil. We are to invoke God's blessing that we might inherit a blessing. For if we fail to do this we ourselves will not be blessed.

The terms Peace, life and goodness are given deeper meaning as the realities of Christian existence.

In the psalm today we hear a hymn of praise to God the Saviour, and in the gospel the language of love dominates Jesus says, "If you love me you will keep my commandments" We hear then the assurance of a doting parent.

"You will not be orphaned", he says, "I will send the Holy Spirit to accompany and guide you".

And Jesus continues, “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

The Christian church, indeed the Christian faith is built on the power of love revealed in Jesus Christ through the God who is love.

And this love takes shape in personal transformation that has produced responsive love through courage, reverence and resolve in individuals from the early saints, martyrs and mystics, to today’s saints, martyrs and mystics in everyday people in whom the Father and the Son have made their home.

The activity of this love is also about transformation in community and in the world. And we witness this down through the ages in the way the Christian church has initiated caring services by the provision of home nursing care, hospitals, aged care facilities, palliative care hospices, youth clubs and facilities, schools, education programs in first and third world countries, aide agencies on a world scale, church care groups such as Anglicare, Blue care, and St Vincent’s care services to name some of the many established in the name of Jesus Christ the Risen Lord of Life. Can we even imagine our society without them?

The way of the Christian faith also underpins much of our legal and political systems, the concept of public and private morality, our literature and the arts. T. S. Eliot, the famous English poet, once said that if Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes.

It is correct also to say that all this activity of Christian love, does not make the church perfect or mistake proof, yet at the heart of our faith is the call to self-examine personally and corporately - to face and repent of wrongdoings – which as a church we perpetually continue to do.

Now I don't think it is any surprise to us that we live in a secular world that seeks to strive for standards set by world values, and in many ways, seeks to make irrelevant the spiritual life that flows from the fullness of Christian love.

I also believe that we who seek to grow in the way of the Christian faith, are to be encouraged to know and keep in our hearts and minds, the amazing power of God's love, humble and tender as it is, and how it continues to pour out its bounty that can lead to true growth and freedom in individuals and communities of the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

What I would say to you today is that I believe it is important to claim this faith-filled way of being as who we are- *For in him we live and move and have our being*, as Paul writes in today's reading.

I believe it is important to claim it and live in it openly, because it is the most positive, life giving foundation that we can have.

It is, in fact where our home is – where we truly live in this world – in the love of God in Christ Jesus.

May we each know and witness to this truth in all we do, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Pray the collect together

*O God, you have prepared for those who love you joys beyond our understanding: pour into our hearts such love for you, that, loving you above all else, we may obtain your promises that exceed all we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*