

Acts 11:1-18

John 13:31-35

St. Peter's Yateley 8am BCP

St. Mary's Eversley 11am CW HC

Judas has just left the room.

Jesus has just tripped the switch on Judas' betrayal of him (John 13:27), and the hours of anguish, pain, torture, and eventual death that will follow.

Jesus has not done as we might if we knew our friendship was about to be sold for a quick buck and our own slow and lingering death. There has been no public denouncement of Judas' recent conniving with the authorities (?), or prophesy as to his impending actions (??); just a quiet acceptance that this has to be. Jesus has seen what lies in Judas' heart, and knows that here is the point where the love that brought him into the world encounters the pain and suffering which was its purpose and his to end.

So, Jesus remains sat at table with his disciples, sharing bread and fellowship, taking one last chance to explain again the victory of love that the next few days will bring. Seeing again those he has become closest too, Jesus would have

understood better than we their disparate characters, and all the conversations that have gone before:

Simon Peter the always certain (??), often mistaken (John 13:8-10), liar (??) and leader in waiting (Acts 11:1-18!).

Thomas, the questioner (??), the voicer of doubts (??).

James, the simple fisherman (Matt 4:21-22) who hankered after greater things (Matt 20:20-28).

Matthew, from another place, by necessity more literate, initially pilloried as a tax collector and collaborator (Luke 5:30).

Like all last conversations with our nearest and dearest, what follows is loaded with the emotion of the moment. Jesus sees his closest friends and knows there is just time to explain it all one more time, to be concise, to focus on the core message, to repeat it in a way that is simple enough for a child to understand: they have just one task, to “love one another”.

Like other things sold as ‘new’, Jesus words sound like many that have come before them... not least the Ten Commandments of the old covenant with Israel that previously tried to encapsulate the breadth of what love should be.

Yet this love is ‘new. Firstly, because here the source of the love is shown to be no distant presence in a cloud from which we have to hide our face, but an invitation from a

friend, Jesus, who invites us to share a meal with him. Secondly, this friend is also about to offer the ultimate example of what this love looks like; those who share this meal must 'take and eat' hard work and sacrifice, not just in the family of Israel but for every other community they encounter. And thirdly, through those two things, this meal inaugurates a new community whose sole purpose is that we "have love for one another" in "remembrance of him" (1 Cor 11:24-25).

I wonder if Peter remembered this incident when he was welcomed at another table? Drawn to Cornelius' house by both a vision and another personal invitation, here is a further example of what Jesus' love looks like. Peter is required by the Holy Spirit to sit light to well-worn traditions, bringing to life the idea that there is to be no "them and us" (Acts 11:12) when we love one another.

Peter, through the Holy Spirit, had looked at Cornelius and his family with Jesus' eyes; eyes of love and recognised in Cornelius someone who fears God, gives generously and is faithful in prayer (Acts 10:2), and the Holy Spirit proves the rest of God's point. Now, in the faces of the Jerusalem Christians he sees a reminder of his own hesitancy over sharing food with Gentiles, and is reminded of the message of what he saw in his vision, and the certainty with which he felt he had to apply it when invited by Cornelius. Peter has seen, and now so must the rest of the Christian community,

that the story of Jesus' love and the command to love one another, is not exclusively for the disciples, or the Jews, but for everyone: no-one is to be excluded from the community of God's love.

This morning it is we who sit at table with Jesus. This is the meal he invites us to and we are his guests. He sees and understands us as we are, with all the history, mistakes, certainties and misconceptions that we bring to this meal. We are known and loved by him unconditionally, and through his constant presence with us have a share in the sacrifice of this meal, not just for this moment but through every day of our lives. Peter went from his last meal with Jesus, and lied about their friendship. Thomas would later doubt the testimony of their mutual friends as to Jesus' resurrection, and yet for them, and us, Jesus' loving sacrifice purchases a place and a purpose at his table, time, and time again.

Guests as we are, like Peter at Cornelius's house we are also the hosts, hosts to this story of Jesus' sacrifice and continued presence through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are now the ones who have been tasked with telling this story of love to all the world, and we are to tell it as Peter did, by going and sharing it with anyone who invites us, whatever our perceptions of the things that may divide us.

If God so loved the world that Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it, who are we to place limits on the way we exhibit and share his love? And that begs the question: who is missing?

At some point, people have left the room, our family or friendship group, or dare I say it our church, and therefore they can't hear what Jesus is saying just now. It might be easy to suggest that there was only ever one Judas who betrayed Jesus to his death, but our lives show us that's not true. We know times when we've felt betrayed, and we need to acknowledge the truth of that so that we can understand and work for another truth: for there are many people who have never been invited to share this meal in the first place and we need to go to where they are!

Peter was already in Joppa sharing his stories of Jesus' love when he experienced his vision of the inclusive love of God and was invited to Cornelius' home. Likewise we are called to be out there in the world, aware of the Holy Spirit's promptings, remembering that however difficult it might be for us to get our heads round it, there is no "them and us" in the command to "love one another".