

Sundays' Sermon by Nicki Bullivant – 9 May 2021

I am sharing 'Easter 6B' with you.

Over the past 15 months we have become all too familiar with rules and regulations regarding who we can and cannot talk to and meet up with and where we can and cannot go. We haven't been able to invite people into our homes or to visit those we love. There are restrictions on the number of people who can gather for funerals and weddings. We haven't been able to grieve together or celebrate together. These regulations have been put in place to protect us and keep us and those we love safe. Hopefully in the next few weeks and months we will see a further relaxing and eventual removal of these restrictions.

Restrictions aren't something new though, every day we encounter boundaries and restrictions both visible and invisible. Many of the boundaries we construct are necessary and appropriate but not all are rooted in love and concern for the wellbeing of others rather they are rooted in prejudice, suspicion and misunderstanding.

Our reading in Acts continues the account of the meeting between Peter a Jewish Christian and other circumcised believers, with Cornelius, a Roman centurion and his household who were gentiles. There are clearly defined boundaries between the two and their respective cultures. While **Peter** and Cornelius have central roles in this story, the story is not solely about them, but rather about the Holy Spirit and how the Spirit's purposes are accomplished in spite of the boundaries that we construct.

We see here the extravagance of God's love and grace. The Spirit is not bound by the limitations and boundaries that we put in place. This is an important message for the world and the Church today. Many are still judged, misunderstood and excluded because of the colour of their skin, their age, their gender, their sexuality, their race, their religious beliefs, and their social and economic standing, as we hold firmly to the visible and invisible boundaries between 'us' and them.'

Neither Peter nor Cornelius, were able to cross the boundaries between them on their own. It was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that empowered them to move from their segregated places. The Holy Spirit broke down the barriers between Jew and Gentile. And by the power of the Spirit Peter and Cornelius were given eyes to see each other and the world differently. By the power of the Spirit within us, we too can live lives that challenge the boundaries of prejudice, injustice and exclusion. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to cross boundaries of prejudice and division as we live life together in the flow of God's love.

Our gospel reading also speaks living life together in the flow of God's love.

I have read this passage many, many times and to my shame the words have become so familiar that I have tended to skim over them, without prayerfully considering them, studying them or allowing them to impact my way of thinking and behaving. While

prayerfully reading these verses in preparation for today two words and stuck out, love and friendship.

I counted the word love or loved 9 times in these 9 verses. But what does true love, real love look like?

Rooted in God's love for the world love bears the fruit of justice, joy and reconciliation, it makes room for other people to flourish. It nurtures friendships. Love includes the excluded, invites the ostracized, and meets the needs of the hungry, the isolated and oppressed. Such love is primarily interested in the good of the other person, rather than one's own. Love becomes a transforming power rather than a superficial and emotional expression. But we cannot give love unless we have first received it. This was true of Jesus too; he said to His disciples, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.' This isn't a sentimental call to love one another; this is a radical call to love. This is a love that in the words of 1 Cor 13 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things, a love that knows no end. This is love in action and is not unique to Jesus but is to be characteristic of all those who call themselves his disciples.

Because of his love for us Jesus no longer calls us servants but friends.

I can remember breaking down late one night and phoning a friend to ask him if he could come to my rescue and tow my car home, on getting safely home I thanked for coming out to help me so late at night. He grinned and said 'Don't worry about it, that's what friends are for.' Is that really what friends are for? Friends do help us towing our cars home late at night, by being at the end of a phone in an emergency. But friends are so much more than this, friends are gifts given to us by a God who loves us. I would go so far as to say that true friends are one of life's greatest gifts. Friends accept us, care for us, make us laugh, challenge us, listen to us, steady us, help us to pick up the pieces when life falls apart, friends inspire us. It is in our friendship with others we learn to develop the fruit of patience, kindness, forgiveness and justice. It through friendship that we practice hospitality, generosity and compassion. It is often through friendship that we learn to love.

As I thought more about friendship, I asked myself, what does friendship with Jesus look like for me, for us in this parish? A sign of our friendship with Christ is taking seriously what he takes seriously and learning from his example what true friendship looks like. Christ not only befriended those deserving of friendship, he also reached out to those who were different, and those society shunned and rejected, those who were hostile to him. Am I prepared to do this?

And how do we know if we have fulfilled the commandment to love one another? The example that Jesus gives, of his willingness to die for his friends is not a comforting one.

Not many of us will find ourselves in the situation where we are asked to lay down our lives as an expression of friendship and an act of love but that doesn't mean that we are exempt

from Jesus' commandment to love as he loves. Few of us are called to demonstrate our love by dying for others but each and every one of us are called to demonstrate our love by living for others. There are many ways to practice sacrificial love: listening, helping, encouraging, giving of our time and our resources. We can never think too highly of love and friendship. Jesus has called us and chosen us to be his friends, to love as he loves and to bear fruit that will last. We cannot do this in our own strength. We need to abide in Christ and in doing so we will recognise that our love for each other is a reflection of our love for God.

As one in community, God draws us into the perfect love that exists within the Trinity and invites us to participate in that love. He calls the body of Christ to become a body of mutual love in the world so that people will see and experience for themselves the love and friendship of God.

As we abide in Christ, as we lean on and trust in him may the Holy Spirit flow through us breaking down the dividing walls of prejudice and exclusion. May we be true and faithful friends to Christ and others. And may we love one another as Christ has loved us as we live life together in the flow of God's love.