



Fifth Sunday of Easter

2 May 2010

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Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

In lifting these verses of the Last Supper discourse where Jesus gives the disciples his new commandment of love out of their original time-frame, hearing them together now in Eastertime, we collapse the usual distinctions between past and present. Christ crucified and living is speaking here and now to another company of disciples assembled to break bread together. Week by week Christ speaks to us as we gather around him: our master and guide; the way, the truth, the life. While we sit for other scripture readings, we stand to greet Christ and hear his good news, for he is present with us now in a way Isaiah or Jeremiah or Paul can never be. This real presence of the living Word - within and behind and through the written word - is always constant and faithful, while we are rather scatty in terms of attentiveness and receptivity. On some occasions, we listen carefully and really struggle to understand what is being said to us. Sometimes, the gospel is subtle and sophisticated, requiring a good deal of sifting and sorting in order to come to grips with its implications. Equally, it can be unadorned, blunt, to the point, its drift inescapable.

Perhaps, today is one of those days – a day when the Lord of the church seems very near and very clear. For today, the living Christ, with the costly scars of love engraved in his crucified body, calls us to that costly love which alone makes Christian community possible. ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.’ Our calling is nothing less than to be the Lord in the here and now, his flesh and blood body in the world, sent out in the communion of his Spirit on precisely the same mission that he receives from his Father, and this means that we are to go about it in a particular and recognizable fashion. In a word, we are to love each other just as he loved us, so that others, observing the distinctive quality of this love, can see Christ and be attracted to his company. Through us he goes on living and loving, giving himself away today just as he did so long ago in Galilee and Jerusalem. Now, as then, he loves generously, lavishly, unconditionally, passionately, patiently, careless of the cost. Such love, says the Apostle, is kind; such love is humble and courteous and gentle and persistent. It is never envious, never

boastful, never arrogant, never rude, it does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, it is not quick to take offence, but spends its energies rejoicing in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Such never-ending love makes the church Christian, such never-ending love makes each one of us like Christ.

Only a Christlike church can proclaim the Christlike God. What we say, however eloquent, will not be heard if who we are and what we do give the lie to our fine words. Words and symbols speak only where their truth is being lived out. This incarnational witness belongs to you and to me, it is the work of ordinary everyday disciples, for great saints and great sinners in the end prove very little. There is a terrible reminder of this in Franciscan tradition. At the end of St Francis' strange meeting with Sala'din, the sultan is reported to have said, 'if ever I meet a second Christian like you I would be willing to be baptized, but, sadly, I know there is no danger of that.' Less than three hundred years later a king in Peru said something very similar, yet horribly, terrifyingly different, to a Franciscan friar who was giving the conquered Incas the choice of conversion or death. The king refused to repent and believe, so they cut off his hands, and then the friar said to him again: 'Be baptized and you will go to heaven. 'No', said the king, 'for if I go to heaven I might meet another Christian like you.'

Only a Christlike church can really preach the Christlike God; only a truly catholic Church can ever reveal the catholic God. That extraordinary Australian saint, Archbishop Frank Woods, liked to say 'only God is catholic; the catholic Church hasn't happened yet.' So what will this catholic Church look like when we finally let it happen? This church of the future will be realistic and humble enough to know it is not the only repository of truth and that it does not have all the answers. It will be generous enough to welcome the companionship and insights of other seekers after truth, acknowledging that God's truth is greater and more glorious than any one religious system. It will be honest enough to admit that it has turned a face of fear and condemnation to the world at least as often as it has embodied Christ's faith and hope and love. The truly catholic Church which is yet to come will be a community of faith characterised by wide open, generous, inclusive, no-strings-acceptance; refusing its perennial temptation of self-obsession; turning always to Christ; smiling on the world where he is still suffering and dying and rising every single day. Again and again, this new Church will gladly leave its mistakes and sins behind, as it joins hands with other seekers in a common quest for the beauty which lies beyond our grasp. Just like our own faith community, this great Church will be united week by week around the Lord's table - opening the word together, breaking and sharing bread with the hungry, learning slowly, sometimes painfully, how to live Christ's selfless love in our relationships for the sake of the world. 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.' The catholic Church of the catholic God begins with us.