

Sixth Sunday of Easter – 5 May 2024

Message – Absolute inclusivity

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, revealed to us through the One Spirit, open our hearts and minds, ears and eyes, to your love and grace. **Amen.**

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles completes what was started last week. It is not just the Jews, or the Jews and Samaritans, who are invited into God's kingdom. It is everybody. This was first revealed to Saint Peter in the form of a vision. Disappointingly, said vision is missing from our lectionary readings, so here is an abridged translation:

About noon, somewhat hungry, Peter went up on the roof to pray and he fell into a trance. He saw something like a large sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice replied, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. And Peter was greatly puzzled what of make of the vision! [NRSVA – abridged]

The vision and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household left Peter in no doubt as to the meaning of his vision. All are included. The gift that was given to the apostles is for ALL people.

This was not the end of the debate; the next question was to what extent these gentile Christians should follow the Jewish laws, a debate that we see unfold in the further

chapters of the book of the acts of the apostles. Even today, we have Churches who believe we should still obey significant portions of the Hebrew law.

In response to this we may turn to the First Epistle of St John. By now you will have spotted the three themes running through the letter. John offers three tests to show that we are followers of Christ: Obedience to God, Love for God and for God's children, and Belief.

Obedience, Love and Belief are so interwoven that they form a single whole, which John explores from every direction. You cannot meaningfully have any of them without having all three. How do we know what obedience is, it is always to love God and love our neighbour. Without love there is no obedience. In John's vision it is our belief that enables us to overcome the priorities of the world and express the love and obedience that reflects our belief.

In the vision of our gospel reading, it is through obedience and love that we will bear much fruit, fruit that will last, as Christ commands us. So, we like the Apostles are called to share our faith, our belief, through obedience and love.

Today, we don't imagine that anyone is excluded from the Christian faith because of their past beliefs, their ethnicity, or their culture. In this regard we are, at least in word, if not always in practice, an inclusive church.

My use of the word inclusive will probably make some of you uncomfortable. This might be because you have a suspicion of the public narrative around inclusivity. This might be because you think there are people who should not be included in the church. This might be because you

think that we are already inclusive. This might be because you think it gives permission to types of behaviour that do not respect others. There are many reasons why the idea of inclusivity may make us uncomfortable.

Yet, I believe we are called to be inclusive, and wonder just who the many groups of people are we exclude, intentionally or unintentionally. I will start with an easy one.

If you have managed to get your wheelchair up Pukerangiora, which itself is no small challenge, where are you going to sit in our services? You either get to sit at the very back of church or the very front. We have no space where someone in a wheelchair can park up in the middle of the church. It's not a difficult thing to fix. The shortening of a couple of pews in a couple of places would give us such spaces. But we haven't done it. I am sure that those who use walkers would likewise appreciate consideration.

There are many kinds of disability, visible and invisible, we should be regularly auditing our services to see that they are accessible to as many people as possible. Changing our service sheets to a sans-serif font, the one the Church of England chose in collaboration with the Royal National Institute for the Blind, and the increase in font size were to make our service sheets easier to read for a range of people, including those with other kinds of reading difficulties. Sadly, our Aotearoa New Zealand Prayer Book is still in a serif font despite recognised best practice.

Within our own province, we recognise the reality that ethnicity is still an issue. Though the Anglican church here has deep indigenous roots, it became Pākehā dominated.

Our split into three tikanga was a first step along the way to addressing the imbalance of power and wealth but only a first step: we still have much work to do. And we are left with the wider question of how we include people of every ethnicity in a country as diverse as ours.

As a church we have moved forward on the issue of Gender equality but it is still, for example, a struggle to get equality on our vestry, and in our house of bishops. We have made some significant steps but we have certainly not reached a point of full inclusion. Christ calls us all to use our gifts and talents, the church is failing to fully enable the use of those gifts and talents through a lack of gender equality.

And that is only thinking in binary terms. We haven't even started to get to grips with the reality of non-binary gender. At present, someone who is recognised as non-binary is unable to marry in our church but should they choose to be defined as the opposite gender to their partner, they can get married, making something of a fool of our rules.

It is sometimes argued that it doesn't matter because only one in one thousand people are affected. This is no argument at all. We can see that we are excluding these people. Inclusion brings challenges which we must face up to, no matter how uncomfortable they make us feel. That is the nature of obedience, love, and belief.

How inclusive are we of those who face mental health challenges? I hope we are reasonably inclusive but I am also sure that there are people whom we fail. In some cases, their needs are too great for us to safely hold them. In such cases we should be campaigning for better mental health

care. If we think our health care is generally underfunded, it is nothing compared to the underfunding of our mental healthcare. It is stretched beyond the limit and can only provide an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. Those whose family mental health affects will recognise the priority to this but it should be a priority for us all, it is the only possible loving response.

For a more local response, I am hoping to run the sanctuary course here, which gives people tools for engaging with those with mental health challenges. We have significant expertise in this in our congregation, which our belief in the value of everyone calls us to share.

How inclusive are we of those who live with economic poverty. It is a complex question. In less than two years here I have seen just how challenging this can be, balancing the need to keep the members of the church safe while also offering service and support to those who have very little. This offering love stuff is sacrificial not easy and convenient.

And finally, are we an inclusive church for those who are not heterosexual, those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex (LGBTQI)? I hope that we are, such people will find support and care from me, they find it from most of our community. They are people made in the image of God, God's children, just as you or I are. And, if they are brave enough to still be in the church, they have faced up to far greater challenges than most of us. For that alone, we should love them as God loves them.

The framework of obedience, love, and belief also provide limits to our inclusion. Those who will not obey God's law

of love, cannot truly be part of an inclusive church. We will try to show them what love looks like and encourage them to change but for the safety of all, for the love for all, those who threaten the safety of others cannot remain a part of our community, a community built on obedience, love, and belief, including them would exclude others who can do nothing about the situation.

Implicit in inclusivity is also the deepest possible mutual respect, invincible goodwill, and a willingness to learn from one another of our very different lives and worldviews.

May God guide us as we walk together, grow together, lean to love together, suffer together, and are joyful together.
Amen. Amen.