

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C, 2022

Acts 11.1-8; Psalm 148.1-6; Revelation 21.1-6; John 13.31-35

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 for one another.

Today's readings, all taken from the New Testament but one remind us of the breadth of the Christian faith centred on Jesus as Messiah, Saviour, Son of God, a breadth which will always explode the everyday self-limiting conceptions of our existence as we contemplate God's saving and life-giving work in creation. '... the one on the throne said, See I am making all things new!'

I have to tell you something. Last week I travelled to the centre of the world! Really! You don't believe me? According to Greek mythology Zeus despatched two eagles from the opposite ends of the earth. Each flying at the same speed and height crossing in Delphi which to this day is marked for acoustical try-outs by a stone called an omphalós meaning navel. There I stood with 21 persons linked to Christ Church surrounded by the remains of ancient Delphi knowing of course that this ancient site had once held great significance for many people until its abandonment possibly in the 4th century. How many people I wondered had over the centuries made the journey to the centre/the navel of the ancient world as determined by Greek mythology?

The above picture is an aide memoire to hold before us the centrality of Jesus as the Christ, as well as the centre of our Christian lives as we go about our daily business, as we prepare for our first Street Party of the millennium and a few weeks later the Lange Nacht der Kirchen, the Long Night of the Churches. Both these events can and will - accompanied by prayer and advanced by hard work and commitment - further the mission of Christ Church in Vienna

and beyond, after the Fourth Lockdown of a global pandemic, the gradual lifting of restrictions and the weakening of the omicron variant. The Street Party and the Lange Nacht der Kirchen together are a timely opportunity for us to witness to Christ as a community centred in Christ, as our stained window calls us to do. Each of us has a part to play, to which the saints depicted in the window bear witness: through proclamation (Stephen), service to others (Martin), while taking seriously the spiritual battle that is raging all around us (George) leading some to question and to waver in their faith.

A week ago Saturday I stood in the ancient forum of Corinth in Greece, where Paul was brought before the governor Gallio by those who opposed the message Paul proclaimed: a message of salvation by justification by faith. The writing of the First Letter to the Corinthians by Paul was occasioned by inner turmoils that had broken out within the community on a number of issues, which inspired Paul to dictate towards the end of the letter the Ode to Love, which is a favourite reading at many a wedding service. Love is... Love is... And the best of all is love and it will remain when all our strivings cease.

At Epidaurus some 40 kilometers from ancient Corinth there is a well preserved Greek theatre, which seated 15000 persons and is still in use today for theatrical and musical performances. Only the best, our guide Maria assured us, were allowed to perform in this theatre, which is known for its acoustics. Many people were trying them out but evidently being shy they weren't affording us a good demonstration. On impulse I decided to have a go. Having been to ancient Corinth earlier in the day, still thinking about Paul as we walked 'In his Footsteps' - aided by a modern bus I admit - I pulled out my pocket Bible and from the spot marked for acoustical try-outs I read aloud Paul's Ode to Love. I won't forget that brief moment in the pilgrimage, nor how people applauded. I like to think they were applauding the content, the words

written approximately 1950 years ago inspired by Paul knowing Christ and Him risen. In that letter and especially in the Ode to Love Paul gives shape to what love is and ought to be. What does your understanding of love look like and if you like Paul can give shape to it, how are you living it?

I want to add three things here that seem important when thinking about Paul and love. Paul is the Apostle, born untimely as he states, who is known to have had companions. We even keep in our church calendar a day named Timothy and Titus, Companions of St Paul on 26 January witnessing as it does to friendship. As our eight-day pilgrimage drew to a close I read from Sousse, where there is a Temple to Poseidon, the account in Acts of Paul's only speech to a Christian gathering, the gathering of the elders from Ephesus in Miletus. The scene ends with a picture of Paul kneeling down. One assumes he has knelt down for the elders to pray over him. The scene is a farewell scene and it is marked by much weeping, as Paul has told them that they will see him no more. This touching scene speaks to me of an Apostle much loved. An Apostle known for his teaching, but whose ministry was marked, which comes through in his letters, by a ministry of prayer and who was much loved suggesting that many of us have got a wrong picture of Paul.

Let us backtrack to our gospel reading, which invites us to consider how love is shaped by Jesus, who commands us to love one another as he has loved us. So it is paramount to understand what this love looks like of which Paul is an exemplar. The simple answer is that this love is cross shaped. Love has a shape. And it is this love that is to be the centre of our lives. The centre of our activities. The centre of our being. Not a place on earth – unless it be in our hearts, on our minds and on our lips.

It is as Jesus teaches a love that will lay down its life for a friend. Jesus continues saying to the disciples gathered around him, you are my friends. All of us are disciples of Christ, as we seek to follow him, who is the way. The pilgrimage we are on in this life is one from discipleship with Jesus into friendship with God, which as Jesus says is characterised by laying down one's life, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15.13) Oh, how I know how difficult it is to lay down pride, feeling superior, knowing better, being wronged, ... Too many look back rather than forward into the way that leads to life holding on that which does not give life. Jesus also demonstrates that love is to be characterised by service, as he rises from table he takes off his outer garment and washes the disciples' feet. Rising he says to them, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13.14) This Johannine sentiment is echoed in Matthew's gospel.

"It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:20-28)

It has been noted that this love of which we speak is first addressed to the community of believers. In this it would seem to be circumscribed, but it is clear that God's love as made known by Jesus is cross shaped and it is for the whole of creation. It has a cosmic dimension captured in the reading from the Book of Revelation, but also in John's gospel when the Evangelist writes, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. " (John 3.16)

Furthermore there may be a few who love in this way unknowingly, but most of us will need to learn this kind of love allowing ourselves to be shaped by it. We are like the athletes of old, but our concern is not for our outward appearance in the first place, but rather for a beautiful inner life that is

becoming more and more cross shaped. Shaped by the love that lays down its life for its friends.

I end with one more image taken from our visit to the Parthenon Museum at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens. There is a beautiful carved statute of a young Greek man around whose neck is draped a calf. The similarity of this image with the Good Shepherd with the lamb draped around his neck is striking. There is however a significant difference. The man with the calf draped around his neck is most likely carrying this calf to be sacrificed, whereas in Christianity Jesus is both the priest and the offering. He is the lamb. He himself the offering. Again John, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' It is God who closes the gap. It is God who puts away the enmity that has sprung up between God and humanity and which remains an ever present reality. See for example the war in Ukraine with its spurious justification. Jesus is both the Good Shepherd and the offering as symbolised by the lamb. I conclude with a stanza from a hymn that makes this point memorably. It is from *Alleluia! Sing to Jesus*.

Thou within the veil hast entered,  
robed in flesh, our great High Priest.  
Thou on earth both Priest and Victim  
in the Eucharistic Feast.

"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 for one another."