

Love one another, as I have loved you

John 13:31-35 and Acts 11:1-18

Until quite recently, people did not travel very far. For example, in Medieval times, Pilgrims might set off once in a lifetime to go out of their village and visit one of the great traditional shrines. Soldiers might go to war and so travel to places others only dreamed of. Merchants did travel to work their trade if they were wealthy enough. Some Students and Clerics made their way to the great cities to learn or teach. But the great majority of people never left their native village. When travelling in Europe, I came across older people who even today had never ventured out of their local area.

Even when I was young, travel was very limited. My grandparents lived at Eudunda in South Australia, while we lived in Victoria at Warrnambool. I only saw them twice in my life. Of course, cars didn't travel so fast then. My father thought we were living dangerously if we could drive seventy kilometers per hour in our Hillman Minx, for that long trip over! My father would also embarrass us all by stopping and going into some house along the way, or worse still, sending me into some strangers house, to ask for hot water so that tea could be made on the journey!

We certainly live in a different world today. The world is becoming much smaller and so much more accessible to even the common person. We travel for pleasure now. Tourism is a vast industry, taking us to places we could only ever dream about in the past. As a result we know each other as races, cultures and nations so much more than ever before. One would think and hope that this would make us more understanding of other cultures and bring us to respect and appreciate other cultures more, but that is taking far more

time if indeed it ever happens. That requires us to have that central value of love as our greatest and most treasured goal.

The reading from Acts shows us the truly amazing breakthrough of early Christianity - how it spread out rapidly from its Jewish roots to the whole of the then known world, at a time when travel was not common or so easy and safe. It makes us realise how amazing St Peter was, the architect of this great missionary endeavour. That he could have this vision and this energy and courage is credit not just to him, but has to be given to the Holy Spirit who was working so powerfully in him.

Of course there were many challenges apart from the danger and the opposition he encountered. One major challenge was how eagerly the "pagans" embraced the message of the Gospel and then displayed all the signs of having received the Holy Spirit. Peter's question for the Christians back home was how should they accept these "pagan" converts? What should be asked or expected of them as regard to practices and rules? Should they have to conform to the same rules and practices as Jewish Christians?

We strike the same thing with Aboriginal Christian people - certainly the early missionaries did. How westernised should they become? Do they have to be confirmed in the traditional white gown and so on and so on. Today it is more a question of how much of their ancient tribal beliefs can be held and incorporated in their belief in the Christian faith. So it's an ongoing concern not just peculiar to Peter's and Paul's time.

The first great council of the church in Jerusalem had to deal with this question. As you can imagine, with people who had held certain practices for centuries so strictly, it was a fiery and hot debate. Amazingly that council came to the decision

that no restrictions should be placed on the newcomers, except when practices could confuse or cause scandal. Can you believe how enlightened this decision was! It was truly an immense decision for these fundamentally "jewish" Christians to make and they could only have made it because the Holy Spirit was working so strongly within them. It was the Holy Spirit who made them realise and internalise the message of our gospel reading for today and then act on it, "Love one another, as I have loved you".

With some of the questions facing us in our church today, we could look back to what happened with the early church and how they viewed practises and customs which were not essential to our salvation.

Jesus put the utmost emphasis on love as the most needed quality, a quality which was then to be made real in actions. It has been the history of our church (as well as many others), that precisely when we need to display love most, it has often gone lacking. When great debates in the church have raged over often small differences in theology, both sides should have stopped to read these verses of Jesus over and over and pray, with them in mind, before they went in to discuss the issue. Instead there has often been something more like hatred and anger and bitterness displayed, one side toward the other. Perhaps before any great debate in our church is held, we should order that all take time out and go and meditate and pray for an hour on these words of Jesus, and then come back to discuss the issues. Maybe we could even take note of this for our own meetings and discussions.

But of course, this is just so important even for the most insignificant conversation and discussions we have with our acquaintances, our work mates, the people we play sport with, the people we spend time at the pub with, the person we have

just had an accident with, the policeman who has just given us a fine, the shop owner who has just sold us that part which was not correct, the teacher who has just incorrectly punished us and so we could go on.

The point is that Jesus did not tell us these words about love, so that we could write them on cards and feel good about them. He did not give them to us so that we could say words like this to the one we love when we feel in the mood. He did not just give them to us to say to our children, whom we love, or to our parents whom we know we should love. Jesus meant them to be the very things we live for, the very things we build our whole lives on, the things we could not live without. They are to become second nature to us so that every negative thought is automatically captured and turned into something loving, every negative action is turned into an action which will help and bless others.

In all of our journeys through life, let us work for this to be said about us at the end of our life, "Wasn't it amazing how this person loved others."

All glory and honour be to our God who loved us so dearly.

Amen.