

Sharing in God's Blessing

A sermon prepared by Revd dr William Whyte for the 6th Sunday of Easter, 9 May 2021

Refs: Acts 10. 44-48; 1 John 5. 1-6; John 15.9-17

It's Christian Aid week – and I shall come to that soon. But first, there's a whole lot of theology going on in our readings today; a whole lot of stuff for us to deal with. And the fact that so much of it seems familiar shouldn't blind us to the fact that what we're reading about is of truly cosmic importance. It's also, as I hope to persuade you, critically linked to Christian Aid week, too.

Our first reading describes a pivotal moment in the life of the Church: a sort of second Pentecost. In the first Pentecost, Jewish people were in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot, marking the moment that the Torah was given to the Jewish people. But in this second Pentecost, Peter is in the port city of Jaffa, a cosmopolitan place filled not only with Jews, but also with people from all over the Roman world – and quite possibly beyond. Here are Jews, here are gentiles, here are the pious, here are sinners, here are people of every kind. Yet, God's blessing is available to all, no matter who they are.

This is a profound – a revolutionary – overturning of how religion had always been understood. Up to this point, religion was an inheritance, a family matter, something you were born into. It was the faith of your father. It was like your mother tongue – something you grew up knowing. In this moment, as in Pentecost, where every language became intelligible to everyone, all that is overturned. God's blessing becomes a common inheritance, available to everyone.

It's a theme picked up in our second reading, which makes an equally striking claim: not only is God's blessing available to everyone, it is freely available. It's not hard, it's not difficult; there's no price to pay (at least not by us).

Other religions require sacrifices. They require obedience to strict laws. They require special foods, and special clothes, and bodily modification. But, as our first reading says, this blessing is available to uncircumcised every bit as much to the circumcised. The price of entry – the cost of believing – is nothing. God's blessing, in the Christian dispensation, is freely available to all.

For some, that sounds too good to be true. There are Christians who want to make Grace most costly, the price of God's blessing far higher than God seems to want it to be. There are Christians who'd rather it was only a few who actually get God's love. They would restrict his blessing to the predestined, the demonstrably good, the suitably pious. People like them. But our reading makes it quite clear that in fact God's blessing is available to everyone – even those, perhaps especially those, who don't seem, and who have done nothing to deserve it.

This can seem too easy. It can seem that God is selling himself short, expecting too little from us. But that is also wrong. Far from cheapening God's blessing, this extraordinary generosity in fact demands an extraordinary response from us: not because we must, but because we can.

We're called, in our Gospel, to do two things. The first is to love one another, just as God loves us. Now that's hard enough. Goodness knows. But the second is even more demanding: it's to love everyone – everyone in the world – so that they will know God's love.

These are terrifyingly difficult things to do. Yet, if we believe that God's blessing is available – is there, for everyone in the world – then they are the least we could be expected to do. As the theologian John Millbank once put it, believing that everyone is saved, everyone is blessed by God, doesn't make life easier, it makes life harder. It means that we can never, ever give up on anyone. If everyone can share in God's blessing, then it's our job to make sure that they do.

That, above all, is the message of Christianity – and that, above all, is the message of Christian Aid Week. It's our annual reminder of our duty to the whole world and our annual chance to live out the values that we believe in: that we must love our fellow Christians and work to enable everyone – everyone in the world – to share in God's blessing. Let us pray for that and work to make it so. Amen.