

Breaking barriers

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on the fifth Sunday of Easter 24 April 2016 in St Peter's. Readings: Acts 11 v 1-18, Revelation 21 v 1-6, John 13 v 31-35; also Acts 9 v 36-43, Revelation 7 v 9-17

How big is your Easter hope – and how does it affect our personal lives?

Through this Easter season, we are hearing readings from Acts of the Apostles and from Revelation. Parts of Revelation are very dark, but for the Easter season we have been given very positive beautiful visions of our future – the future for us and for our world, reconciled to God in Christ – the ultimate Easter hope. By contrast, in Acts, we see small scale individual pictures of how this Easter hope works out now on a personal individual level.

The Easter hope is all about the breaking down of barriers – and the breaking down of the greatest barrier of all – the barrier of death. As Jesus rises from the dead, and the barrier of death is broken, so the other barriers start to come down as well – the barriers between us and God, and between us and each other.

We see this in our readings from Acts and Revelation. Oddly, they're a little muddled up across different Sundays. Last week's Acts reading seems to go with this week's Revelation reading, while last week's Revelation reading seems to go with this week's Acts reading. That's very confusing! But what I mean is this.

In last week's Acts reading, we had the delightful story of Dorcas, a much loved lady who fell ill and died, miraculously brought back to life by the apostle Peter. And this week we have the triumphant words in Revelation – *"Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away"*. A powerful statement of the Easter hope – that Christ in his resurrection has broken down the barrier of death for us all.

But in last week's Revelation reading, we saw a different barrier broken down. The reading began with these wonderful words:

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb..."

I love that wonderfully inclusive vision – every nation, every language, every culture – all included, all united. And our reading from Acts today puts this into practice as St Peter is surprised to find himself baptising gentiles – something he had never imagined doing. It took both a vision in a dream, and then a dramatic experience of the Holy Spirit falling on the Roman centurion and his household to challenge and break down St Peter's prejudices in a way he can no longer resist. So another barrier is broken down – St Peter discovers, as St Paul later affirms so strongly, that the Gospel really is for all human beings of every kind and every racial and cultural background – all cultural barriers swept away.

So the Easter hope breaks down all barriers, creating the possibility of a new kind of all embracing unity – something we still long for in our world today. And it goes without saying that this is not a unity that abolishes our differences and makes us all the same, but a unity that welcomes our differences and allows us to celebrate them – while all united together in Christ.

And in fact our reading from Revelation today not only celebrates the abolition of the barrier of death – it also celebrates this all embracing unity:

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them.”*

Here we see God and human beings reconciled, united – both God in union with us, and in God’s presence, we human beings united with each other.

I love this vision, because it’s not in any way about us believers being vindicated, or about us receiving a reward or us in any way being triumphant. Rather, this is about the triumph of love – Love triumphing over hatred, love triumphing over conflict and division, love breaking down barriers. Because the breaking down of all barriers is the triumph of love.

It’s a wonderful vision to uphold – and a vision that affects the whole way we see the world around us. But as those readings from Acts have reminded us, it’s something we also need to put into practice in our own individual lives. And our Gospel reading today tells us very simply how to put into practice in our life as a community and in our own individual lives this vision of the triumph of love breaking down all barriers:

“I give you a new commandment,” Jesus says, “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.”

Strikingly, love for one another is a mark of being followers of Jesus not because we think we are good at it but because it is what we aspire to and aim for above all else. If our vision for the world is the triumph of love breaking down all barriers, then this is the vision that we try to put into practice in our lives as individuals and as a community. This is the vision that defines us – defines what we are about and what we are aiming for.

But of course we need to define quite carefully what loving one another actually means. This is emphatically not an exclusive love – a cosy inward looking group where we love those who are “in”, and are indifferent to everyone else. Or worse still, a community that contains smaller groups that care for themselves and ignore those who are different.

So for example, loving one another means both young and old being equally included in the life of the church – going out of our way to include everyone – of all ages. Loving one another means looking out for the newcomer, and making sure they are included, putting them at their ease, doing nothing that puts up barriers. And loving one another means making sure no one is left on their own – looking out for the person who is by themselves – of course respecting people’s privacy – there is a balance here – but also making sure no one is isolated.

And as a church, loving one another means making sure we are there for our community, that on the one hand we are interested and involved, and on the other hand that we are accessible and open. And of course that we care about the world around us, that we are outward looking.

And in our individual lives it means being outward looking in our involvement in the community or in our place of work – even just in the simple way that we respond to people around us.

Of course it's a tall order – none of us will achieve all of this. But it is our aspiration – the aspiration that defines us as followers of Jesus.

And as our readings from Revelation and Acts remind us, we need both the big vision, and the individual application in our personal lives. Some churches lack that great vision of the triumph of love in our world – and yet are very good at love for one another on a personal level. Other churches are the other way round – they have a great vision of love breaking down all barriers in the world, but lack the application of that love on personal level, in our individual lives.

We need both – both to hold that great vision of the triumph of love in our world – that vision of the union of God with human beings and the union of human beings with one another – and also to apply that vision on a personal level – as a church family and as individual followers of Jesus learning to love one another.