

EASTER 5C  
All Saints Church, Birkenhead

Here we are enjoying our celebration of Easter and hearing the good news of the resurrection and what happens? Today's Gospel comes to us like a punch in the stomach. The narrative puts us back in the Upper Room with Jesus teaching his disciples about his coming death. We have been looking at resurrection and its teaching about new life, heaven, and eternal life. This reading comes to us as if to say, in your excitement of celebrating Easter, don't forget the origin of the good things resurrection brings. These wonderful gifts we have been given begin in the suffering and death of Jesus.

Jesus' suffering wasn't pointless. It happened because he loved people and wanted them to be freed from all the things which spoil life. That brought Jesus into conflict with the authorities. What the religious and secular rulers were doing was inhuman and Jesus wanted to stop it. It was

Jesus love for those who suffer that brought him to the point of suffering.

2

The Gospel reminds us of the very real connection between suffering and love. Somehow the two seem to go together, even though we may not always know how. I suppose too, we would rather have the love without the suffering. It seems life is not made like that. Love and suffering belong together and we are unable to altar that fact. I don't believe all suffering comes from love. But what I often see around me and what I experience is that the two seem to be connected in ways I cannot explain.

Something of this connection shows in the love of Jesus. This Gospel which reminds us of suffering love also tells us Jesus leaves a word of comfort for his disciples. He is to depart from them but he gives them something to hold on to. Jesus says, "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.”

3

Jesus addresses the pain and separation to come with a reminder about their mutual relationships in the community of faith. We may though, wonder why this commandment should be called “new”. Surely that was something people had known even before Jesus. There are many other places in the Bible where people are told to love one another.

I think there are two important features of this commandment which make it new. These two things also help me to see something on the connection between love and suffering.

The first feature of this commandment which makes it new is that now the disciples have an unparalleled model for love. Jesus himself is the model. “Just as I have loved you, you also should

love one another.” Love is no longer something which is just a subject for philosophical discussion. Nor is it simply an emotion which can be trivialised. In Jesus, his disciples of all times have a concrete living expression of love.

4

And this expression of love is one which goes to the uttermost lengths. It’s the love which serves. It’s the love which has compassion, which challenges people to new ways. It’s a love which demands that humans be treated equally, and will not be compromised. That sort of love is willing to suffer for those who are the object of that love.

Maybe we see that sort of love expressed in those who are dedicated to serving others. Do we see it in those who put themselves at the disposal of those in need? Can we see it in those who take risks trying to rescue others at cost to themselves? This love can be seen in those who give themselves to educate others, those who have a passion to share their knowledge of life

and the world and so open up the possibility of new discoveries. I believe this sort of love is seen in those who stand by others in their need and who work to bring about a more just society. This is the sort of practical love we see in the life of Jesus. When this sort of love is expressed, it is sometimes connected with suffering.

5

Jesus doesn't only give his disciples a new model for love. He brings about a new place for that loving to occur. That place is called community. The community Jesus offers his disciples is one where they live out the sort of love Jesus models for them. We are that community of love and Jesus is the model for us. Of course the disciples had difficulty at first to follow this love just as we have difficulty following it. It was something they had to learn as we still have to learn to live it. We see how this community began to develop as we read from the Acts of the Apostles. These readings are about the early Christians as they attempted to form the community Jesus modelled. We read from Acts during the Easter

season to remind us of the type of community Jesus wants us to create. We read these stories to tell us about the successes and the struggles they had. I think a lot of the problems in our world could be put down to a loss of community. We are more connected than ever but many in fact feel disconnected. In some sense human beings are not made to live in these enormous societies. That's why I believe the local parish church is more important than ever in a sea of mega churches which often have no connection to the community around them.

6

Today's reading from Acts is an example of the type of community Jesus expects us to create.

It's an amazing story because it reverses the way of thinking that Peter and the disciples knew. Peter's vision simply told him not to make distinctions between people. The sort of community to create is an inclusive one. It is to

contain those who are normally considered outsiders. This is seen as the work of the Spirit of God. That's a bit disconcerting really, because it leads us to see that the Spirit remains free to bring about new things. These early disciples were amazed at the work of the Spirit and were unprepared for the new things the Spirit brought. They struggled to come to terms with what the Spirit was doing. We too are often unprepared for where the Spirit leads the church and we too struggle to come to terms with it. But I think we can count on the fact that the Spirit, though unpredictable, will always act like Jesus did. It will always act out of love for people wanting to bring the freedom, justice, and equity which were marks of Jesus love.

7

So the seemingly astonishing movements of the Spirit are all quite consistent with God's expression of love for the world. This is the way God builds community.

Love is still the distinguishing mark of the Church. This is the characteristic by which outsiders can discern its authenticity. Along with this love is the suffering of the Church as it seeks to live out what Jesus has modelled. We have a heavy challenge to express this unique quality of life and action in the world. We are called to be the kind of people through who God can continue this same love we see in Jesus. It's a love which is prepared to suffer for the beloved. God does it for us. As a Church can we continue to express that same love for God and others.