

There is the story of a man who came upon two workmen. One man was carefully digging holes at regular intervals along the roadside. The second man followed along behind, carefully filling in the holes. When the second man was asked what he was doing, he said; ‘Planting trees.’ ‘What do you mean? Where are the trees?’ ‘Well, you see, Ed here digs the holes; Chris puts in the trees; then I fill the holes. Unfortunately Chris is off sick.’

A story of people locked into a way of doing things that cannot be changes, however circumstances may change.’ It is easy to laugh at a story like that and lose sight of how we can fall into the same trap. Things have always been this way, why change?

This was certainly the attitude of one section of the Christian Church in Jerusalem when they heard what Peter had been up to in Caesarea, when he had gone into the house of a Gentile; had shared a meal with Gentiles and then had received those same Gentiles into the fellowship of the Church in Baptism.

This had never been done before. Jews did not share fellowship with Gentiles. They certainly never shared meals with Gentiles – that food was unclean. As far as they were concerned, the Gospel was for those who were already Jews. That was the way it was, the way it always had been and always would be.

But things had changed. The ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, his death and resurrection had marked anew beginning in God’s dealings with mankind. It marked the establishment of a new covenant that superceded the old covenant carved in tablets of stone.

So as Peter was to discover in his vision that he recounts in great detail, the old taboos of what he may or may not eat are set aside. ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane’ In the summons to Caesarea he discovers that the old restrictions of who he may or may not have fellowship with are set aside. The commission of the risen Jesus to go into all the world, making disciples of all nations, is to be the dynamic of the new community.

It is a call to move out from the confines of what they have always done to embrace the challenge and opportunities of the death and resurrection of Jesus, to live as an Easter people. Had they not responded to that challenge, the Church would have remained as a sect within Judaism. God’s purposes of redemption for all mankind, first enunciated in the promise to Abraham, that through him and his seed all nations would be blessed, would have been frustrated.

Our Gospel reading tells of the message Jesus imparts to his disciples in the upper room on the night before he died; ‘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.’ *John 13:34-35*

‘Love one another’. Not just a cosy feeling towards one another. No it is to go further than that, much further. ‘Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another’. Christian love, Christ-like love, the love that turns the other cheek. The love that goes the extra mile, the love that reaches out to the

unworthy, the despised, those on the margins of society. It is a love that gives of itself; a redeeming love, a love that breaks down barriers of sin and death. That is the love that we are to share with one another; a love that triumphs over discord, over failure.

‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ We do not witness to Christ by the stridency of our opinions, by assertions of our rights and prerogatives but by how we show in our common life the love that Christ has shown to us. Christ will be made known among us in ways in which we reach out to welcome those on the edge of our fellowship, ways in which we are prepared to forgive those who disappoint us, who hurt us.

All too often Christ’s love for us is seen simply in terms of a prize to be gained. But we must move on to realise that having experienced the love of Christ we are to share it. We must not only say the words, we must live the prayer, ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.’ Indeed, unless we come to see God’s love for us in Christ as something to be shared in word or deed, then we haven’t really understood what it is all about.

As we welcome new members into the fellowship of the Church in Baptism, as we do today, or those who come to join us from outside, what will be their experience of us? May they come to see in us, in our fellowship with one another something of the self giving, self forgetting love of God in Christ and so be drawn into a deeper understanding of God’s love for them in Christ.