

Eph 2 Mark 6 sermon for Sunday July 18th 2021 SJB and SSC.

May I speak and may we all hear in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Just after the second world war, on the wall at one end of a tatty old mission hall in Grimsby hung a huge picture of Jesus, a white man with flowing robes and long fair wavy hair. He was surrounded by children of all races, black, white, brown and yellow. One of them was snuggled on his lap and the rest were all clustered around his knees. I was among the crowd of three to seven year olds sitting in little groups round our long rows of young teachers, gazing at that picture week after week.

One of our songs, “tell me the stories of Jesus “had this verse, “First let me hear how the children stood round his knee, and I shall fancy his blessing resting on me. Words full of kindness, deeds full of grace, all in the love light of Jesu’s face”. It all sounds very old fashioned now and Jesus as a white man with flowing fair locks is clearly wrong. He was a Palestinian Jew, swarthy and probably bearded. But that picture of the children around Jesus and that little song did give us kids one very **right** idea...that the love of God supremely shown in Jesus is for **all peoples throughout the world, including me.**

I dimly remember that we used to keep the feast of the circumcision soon after Christmas in our church. I never knew what circumcision was until I worked in my student vacation as a ward orderly in the children’s ward of our local hospital and saw toddlers standing up in their cots crying. When I asked why they were there, all was explained to me. I guess it must have been for medical reasons because Jewish baby boys are normally circumcised at eight days old, as Jesus was.

The first big row in the early church communities was all about this business of circumcision. All the first male Christians were circumcised Jews like Jesus himself, and many of them were firmly convinced that circumcision was absolutely necessary for all who wanted to follow him.

After all, with some notable exceptions, Jesus had ministered chiefly to the Jews, whose ritual of circumcision had been mandatory since the covenant between God and Abraham...**but-** Jesus had said very clearly, “When I am lifted up (meaning lifted up on the cross) I will draw **all** people to my self”- **-all** people- -and subsequent events since his death and resurrection soon brought many gentiles to believe in him.

Circumcision is **the** big divisive issue that gives rise to our first reading from the letter to the Christian community in Ephesus. For them it was a very big deal. The Ephesians were mainly Gentiles, not Jews. They were called “The Uncircumcision” by some of those who were circumcised. A real put down. But this letter builds them up, reminding them that they are no longer strangers and aliens, no longer on one side of a wall of hostility, but part of one body through the cross of Jesus. They don’t have to become Jews first and lose their own identity. They can all come to him, just as they are, as can we, and all can be reconciled in the body of Christ.

Every week(SJB) (once a month SSC) at the Holy table our priest holds up the consecrated host and breaks it in half saying, “We break this bread to share in the body of Christ” He then holds the two halves together as we respond: “Though we are many we are one body because we all share in the one bread”. I find those two actions, the breaking and the holding together, profoundly moving. The symbolic actions during the prayer of consecration are there to help us take in the drama and meaning of what’s actually happening so it’s fine to keep our eyes open. I’m sure the disciples eyes were all fixed on Jesus as he broke the bread and blessed the cup at the last supper, when he gave us this wonderful sacrament for all time and all people.

Of course, the great circumcision row has been long gone into the mists of time, but the powerful message contained here in this letter has been, and still is, totally relevant to all the many controversies that have followed, not least to those in our own 21st century church.

You may remember that every church now has to have a map..MAP..Mission action plan.

Your standing committee has recently prepared an updated draft in the format required by the diocese. Your PCC members have been asked to consider it prayerfully and come back to their next meeting prepared to fine tune it ready to present to the parish. We have to state our parish vision, our priorities and our goals and show how they’re all closely related to the various strands in the living Gods’ love prayer of our diocese. Our draft vision statement goes like this:

“Our fervent vision is for the Church in the Parish of Boxmoor to be vibrant and welcoming; where the Good News of God’s love in Jesus Christ is proclaimed and lived; where people of all ages/colours/backgrounds/sexuality are nurtured in the faith and valued; where new disciples are made and encouraged on their journeys. Worship should manifest itself through a flourishing community sharing the love, light, and life of Christ as seen in the writings of St John, with laughter, thus embodying all the strands of Living God’s Love.”

“A vibrant welcoming community where people of all ages, colours, backgrounds and sexuality are nurtured in the faith and valued”. YES!

The gospel, the good news of Jesus, can bring nations, ethnic groups, tribes, races, genders into a human relationship, where they can live together as a new community, whose DNA is belief in God, faith in Jesus Christ, and unity in and through the power of the Holy Spirit- -if only we are willing.

Unity though- -not uniformity. We’re never all going to agree on everything, are we! we’re only human! But as our archbishop Justin constantly tells us, we need to learn to disagree well, still loving our brothers and sisters with whom we disagree . We’ll be tested on this close to home very soon as the easing of covid restrictions will inevitably cause differences of opinion. Mike in consultation with the PCC has

carefully considered the best way forward for our worship so we need to take note and act accordingly, with consideration and care.

Our gospel reading opens with the joyful return of the disciples from the first practice mission they've been sent on by Jesus. It's been a spectacular success with so much still going on that they haven't even time to eat. Jesus sees at once what they now need and sends them off to rest and recuperate. In the boat that night they're to cross the lake to a deserted place on the other side.

The next chunk of Mark's account is omitted. It tells of the storm where Jesus walks on water and the arrival of the huge hungry crowd whom he miraculously feeds with a little boy's picnic. After all of this they set off in the boat again, hopefully this time to find peace and quiet, but there's still no chance of that yet. We rejoin them when they land and once more a huge needy crowd has gathered. Notice Jesus's reaction: he has compassion on them. He knows that their spiritual leaders have failed them miserably and that they, unlike their leaders, recognise in him the one who can meet their needs for healing, love, acceptance and guidance. Like the women with the haemorrhages we heard about three weeks ago, they only have to touch his cloak and be healed.

We heard some wonderful things in the sermon that week about how we too can reach out and touch Jesus in our own time and I quote:

We begin by looking at the clothes Jesus wears.

Sometime he drapes himself in silence, solitude, and prayer. Sometimes it's mercy and forgiveness. Sometimes it's thanksgiving and gratitude. Other times it's compassion and generosity. Always it is self-giving love. The very attributes and characteristics of his life are the clothes he wears and the clothes we are to touch.

Wherever you are living drained of life, touch the clothes of Christ. Connect to them in your own life. Let them transfuse you with his life, his love, and his power. Touch and be healed. Touch and be named. Touch and go in peace.

This is the peace we read about in the letter to the Ephesian community, the peace that passes all understanding, the peace so needed by our shattered and divided world. This is the peace we share as we wave to one another after our prayers, the peace we receive in the blessing, the peace we take with us in our hearts at the end of our worship. Not a passive, simply personal peace, but the **active, reconciling** peace of Christ at work in every part of our lives.

Amen.

Carole Lewis