Easter 6 B

**Acts 10.44-end**

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ 48So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

**1 John 5.1-6**

5Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. 2By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. 3For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, 4for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. 5Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? 6 This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

**John 15.9-17**

9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Have you decided who your 5 best friends are? Now there’s the possibility of finally being allowed to meet indoors again, lots of us have been making fantasy guest lists. The trouble is, it always seems to involve excluding someone. We have become used, over the last year, to shutting people out. If you’re not in our bubble, stay away! So of course it will be a huge relief when those restrictions start to relax, not least in church, where we are longing to be able to fill the pews again. That makes today a great day to be reminded that God’s good news is for everyone, not just those who have the Eventbrite login bookmarked. However much we try to be inclusive, churches sometimes give out the subtle message that we’re there for people who look like us, who know the jargon and follow our unspoken rules. But one of the first lessons the church had to learn was that that’s not how God sees things.

Between Easter and Pentecost, our Sunday readings have been following the Acts of the Apostles, tracing the development of the early church. In last week’s instalment, an Ethiopian official, hearing the story of Jesus for the first time, asked “What is to stop me from being baptised?” That same question is echoed in today’s reading: “Can anyone withhold water for baptising these people?” The answer is clearly “No!”: God does not discriminate between nationalities and backgrounds, nor require adherence to special rituals. It’s not necessary for Gentiles to follow Jewish law by becoming circumcised before they can join the church. In broader terms, we don’t make ourselves acceptable to God by following the rules. God has accepted us already, our mistakes are forgiven and our debts are paid. All that’s asked of us is to be ready to receive that gift.

Schooled as we are in the conditionality of human generosity, we sometimes struggle to take God’s promises on trust. The bible often uses images of parenthood to remind us of the kind of unconditional love that might be familiar from our own lives. So in our second reading John declares that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. In the gospel, Jesus paints another picture, that of a friendship – perhaps between comrades in arms – so strong that a person would lay down their life for another. But neither of these human parallels truly expresses the reality of what God has to offer us. And so both Jesus and John are at pains to point out that God’s love is transformative beyond anything that a parent or a friend can give. “Abide in my love,” says Jesus, “so that your joy may be complete.” “Whoever is born of God” John tells us “conquers the world.”

That’s an ambitious claim – it brings to mind the alleged childhood ambition of a certain politician, to be world king. Some of Jesus’ followers hoped that he would become king of the world, and look how badly that turned out. The experience of the disciples just hours after today’s gospel reading (defeated, scattered and terrified) and of the early church (persecuted and driven underground), not to mention the suffering of Christian communities throughout history, show that whatever the writers of these passages had in mind, they were not talking about military or political victory. But perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised. The God revealed by Jesus is not a sword-wielding avenger smiting his enemies from the earth. Jesus’ God is a father, a gardener, a party host, a housewife, a farmer, whose actions are characterised by abundance, creativity, generosity, commitment and acceptance. God’s kingdom is never imposed by force; it’s offered freely to those who want to receive it. So the worldly conquest that John speaks of is something else. It’s sometimes seen in terms of self-mastery: the strength to rise above the urges that trap us in selfishness and destructive habits. But I think it also encompasses a vision that sees beyond the limitations of our present life. In his letter to the Romans, Paul lists a series of the most challenging circumstances he can think of: “trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, death” (he forgot to mention pandemics) – and yet in all these he says “we are more than conquerors” because nothing can separate us from the love of God. If we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the source of the indwelling power of God in us and in the whole created world, then it follows that nothing in that world can cut us off from the love he came to share.

Knowing we are truly loved is like a superpower. It does away with the need to prove ourselves, and the fear of being abandoned. It sets us free to be the people we really are. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,” Jesus tells his disciples. “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Lest we might think those words only apply to the inner ring of his most trusted friends, the unfolding message of the New Testament is that God’s love is freely given to all those who are willing to accept it, no matter what their background or qualifications. Those of you who read the book or watched the film of The Shack as part of this year’s Lent Course will remember that a repeating motif has God saying “I’m especially fond of” this or that person. Finally the protagonist, Mack, asks “Is there anyone you’re not especially fond of?” And God says “Nope, I haven’t been able to find any.”

But as we’ve seen, God doesn’t operate by force. Each of us has a choice whether to respond to the love that is offered to us, or not. “Abide in my love,” says Jesus – and if you heard last week’s sermon you’ll have heard Jane explaining how that the same verb “abide” is applied to vines rooted in the nutritious soil of the vineyard. If we want to feed on the riches of the love God has for us, we need to root ourselves in his soil. And we do that, Jesus tells the disciples, by keeping his commandment, to love one another. This is not a test of stamina, an arbitrary rule to earn God’s favour: God is especially fond of us already! It’s our connection cable to the power that sustains God’s kingdom.

In consciously learning to act with consideration and concern for those around us – perhaps particularly those whose views we don’t share – we realign our vision, so we are able to see the love God showers on us. In showing generosity to other people, we become participants with God in the great creative work of transforming chaos into beauty and suffering into triumph. It’s easy to feel powerless in the face of the many difficulties of our world, and imagine that our small acts of kindness have gone unnoticed and unappreciated. But we can have confidence that God sees and values every one of them, weaving them together into a greater whole. It is God who makes our efforts fruitful; it is God in Jesus Christ who has won the victory over the powers of darkness; it is God who will make our joy complete. We just have to accept the invitation.