

St Brandon's, Sermon for 5th May 2024.

Acts 10:44-end, John 15:9-17

“Can anyone withhold baptising?”

Alison Hobbs

Its lovely to see you all today, and I'm aware this was not the original date you thought of, but happily is the birthday of your late and loved grandmother, May, after whom Ferne is named. Happily, it also coincides with a reading that has some pertinent messages for this particular gathering. That's not always the case: the first baptism I preached at had the story of a particularly gory beheading as it's set reading: messages are always there but some are easier to spot than others!

I'd like to start by explaining the background to the first reading we heard:

Peter is a leader of Jesus' disciples, and has been invited to the house of a roman centurion on the basis of a vision that the centurion had had, in which he was told to send for Peter and ask him what he had to say to them. Meanwhile, Peter had also had a vision: he saw all kinds of foods that Jews were not allowed to eat because they were considered ritually unclean but a voice from heaven had insisted three times that if God called it clean it was clean.

Now the Jews had always understood themselves to be the chosen of God, and to be circumcised was the sign of accepting that you were a Jew, one of the select band that God had set apart. As such, you associated only with your own kind, it was not permitted to eat with or even enter the houses of gentiles: they were ritually unclean. Gentiles being the name that defined anyone who was not Jewish. So, it was a very big deal indeed for Peter go into a gentile – a non-Jewish household.

In obedience to the vision, the centurion asked Peter what he had to say to them. Peter has realised that although the centurion is not Jewish, he has a relationship with God. God is not making distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, and so neither must Peter. Accordingly, Peter tells the whole gathered household about Jesus, how he healed people, mentally,

physically, and spiritually. How he was put to death but rose again – they know he rose again because they themselves ate and drank with the risen Jesus. That Jesus was the one sent by God to forgive our sins, and save us.

It is while Peter is saying these things that the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. Becoming filled with the Spirit of God, the people of the centurion's household start speaking ecstatically, praising and marvelling at God's work, full of desire for Jesus. It was so evidently the Spirit stirring their hearts and understanding that even the circumcised Jews that had accompanied Peter could not deny it – though they were astonished and could barely believe it. Peter speaks for them all, and for God, when he asks, "*Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*"

I wanted to tell you the story that led up to the part that we heard today because there seems to me a parallel with the church as an institute today. It is very easy to associate God with the church in a very exclusive way. To assume that God likes the people that go to church better than those that don't. Perhaps that he might not even notice people that don't go to church, and certainly wouldn't approve of them. We might think this consciously or unconsciously, to a greater or lesser degree whether we are someone who does go to church or someone who doesn't. Today's reading blows that out of the water. The notion of a God who is only for a certain set of religious people is not the true God but is a human construct. That is not to devalue the church: the purpose of the church is for deepening our knowledge, and our understanding of who God is and where he shows up and is at work in our lives. To do that most readily in church because it is the house set aside for the purpose of asking those questions, of sharing our longing and our lost-ness and asking God to help us keep close, assuring each other of his faithfulness and love through the worship, stories and songs.

There's no smoke without fire, as they say, and taking an 'us and them', judgmental attitude is a criticism fairly applied at times: we all get it wrong sometimes. But the amazing truth about God is that he shows no partiality. The amazing truth about Jesus is that he never ceases to keep the door

open for everyone, inviting each and everyone to come and find him because there is no qualifying goodness or worthiness or promise that he asks us to make before he says yes to us. He has said 'yes' to us long before we realise we want to say 'yes' to him. We are free to say 'yes' or 'no' but it is always in response to an invitation that's there from the start. "*You did not choose me but I chose you*", he tells his disciples, and that's the same for every one of us.

The church exists to support us in building our faith so that we can share that with others who have not heard, and do not know the gift they are invited to share, the gift of accepting God's love: receiving the Holy Spirit. A healthy church is one that is outward facing, which is why after receiving the message and tokens of God's love we are sent out to share them with others: "*to bear fruit, fruit that will last.*"

But where do you start? Its easy to assume that there is a level of knowledge or belief that is a pre-requisite to believing in God. That there has to be a swallowing of what can seem incredulous and un-believable before saying 'yes' to God. And that is not true. At every marriage service we hear the words '*God is love*', which is a quote from the bible. It is like a precis of the long speech that Jesus made to his disciples that we heard as the second reading. Jesus is explaining that the amazing way he loves, that heals and frees people, is the same way God loves, and that when his disciples love in that same way – the way he has taught them, they too, will be sharing and showing God to each other because *God is* that sort of love that heals and sets people free.

What has that to do with you and me? Well, it doesn't take being a parent to know how to love but parenting does tend to sharpen our experiences: just think of the lengths and the fierceness to which a bird or animal goes to protect its brood. That is the instinct for love. And since God is love, it is the instinct that leads us to say 'yes', I need love. I need to know I am loved and how to love in return. Everything that follows, is academic: that is, it is the learning about how love has been revealed in the world, and how we recognise it and strengthen our own ability to love.

Today we rejoice that Jemma and David have brought Ferne to ritually receive the Holy Spirit because they have recognised the power of love, and want Ferne, like Joshua, to grow up having received the invitation to be part of God's church. We prayed that she, and all of us will come to know God better in our lives, and when old enough, will say 'yes' to Jesus with her own words.

Amen