

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 19th May 2019

10.30am Morning Worship led by

Rev Richard Bradshaw

6.00pm Evening Worship at Town Close

led by Doreen Hunt

A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Resources

With earth and sky, with birds that fly – come, praise God.
With sun and moon, at night and noon – come, praise God.
With dogs and cats, with bears and bats – come, praise God.
With every race, in every place – come, praise God;
praise the God of all.

Eternal God, as we share our faith in this place, we pray for those of other faiths in other places, for those of no faith, for those who have lost faith, and for those searching for it.

Breathe your Spirit on us all, and unite us in all that is good, that your kingdom may come, and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
We ask this in Jesus' name.

Lord Jesus, you overturned tables and conventions; you challenged leaders and laws; you tore down and built up; you commissioned and called – and so we come to hear your word, to be inspired by your truth, and to live out your love. **Amen**

Lectionary Readings:

Acts 11 v1-18 Peter Explains His Actions

Psalms 148 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars.

Revelation 21 v1-6 The New Jerusalem

John 13 v31-35 Jesus Predicts Peter's Denial

Help or Hindering?

This week our focus is on how the Holy Spirit overcomes human divisions. In Acts, Peter tells the church in Jerusalem that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on Gentiles in Caesarea, as it was on Jews in Jerusalem at Pentecost. As we approach our Holy Habit launch of Eating Together, this reading is especially significant. Food is an important social and cultural symbol. What to eat, and with whom, establishes the boundaries between one community and another – especially when groups feel under pressure to conform to wider cultural norms. Many Jewish writings from this period forbid table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. Later rabbinic sources differ over this, though they insist on Jews not eating food prepared by Gentiles. Although Jesus ate with people regarded by observant Jews as unclean (eg Luke 5 v29-32), there is no Gospel record of his eating with Gentiles – one reason why the issue proved so contentious in the Early Church.

But changing traditional boundaries is unsettling, even disturbing, as Peter discovered when he told his story in Jerusalem. Twice his retelling makes the point that God makes no distinction between what humans call 'clean' and 'unclean'. And he saw the heavenly vision that conveyed this three times. The Jesus movement gained a reputation for 'turning the world upside down'. Hence the importance of highlighting the authority for radical change:

Peter's heavenly vision (v5-10); Jesus' endorsement of John the Baptist (v16); and the shared experience of Jews and Gentiles (v17). Perhaps the most significant statement comes in verse 12: 'The Spirit told me to go with them, and not to make a distinction between them and us.' However much human beings turn community boundaries into barriers, the Spirit of Jesus will not be hindered in overcoming the divisions these create.

In the reading from Revelation, we see how the appearance of the heavenly city is the culmination of the cycles of judgement and salvation in John's visions. The old order's heaven, earth and sea (the ancient symbol of the chaos that threatens God's creation) are replaced by a new heaven and earth, with no sea. The New Jerusalem descends from heaven, rather than being built from the ground up, like the failed project of Babel (Genesis 11 v1-9). John issues a stark warning to those tempted to idolise grandiose schemes, in the Roman world and ever since. The New Jerusalem is a symbol of hope for oppressed people. Here God lives at the heart of human community, in a place of consolation, healing and reconciliation. And, for all its extravagance, John's climactic vision is not wishful thinking; it has the same divine authority as that which he had seen and heard at the beginning.

Then we read from John's Gospel. Here Jesus resumes his talk of leaving the world for a place where no one will be able to find him. What he means becomes clearer. He is about to leave his disciples through the 'lifting up' of his crucifixion. Yet, however real his absence, his presence remains in the coming of the Spirit and the community that lives by his 'new commandment'.

'Love one another as I have loved you' seems at first to be a more restricted calling than 'love your neighbour as yourself', and certainly than 'love your enemies' (Luke 6 v27). But in the face of the hostility that threatens to fragment the community of

disciples, 'love one another as I have loved you' is the essential first step. But only the first. The fourth Gospel insists that God's sacrificial love overcomes all human divisions as it extends into the world. The call to live by Jesus' new commandment is about mission as much as survival.

In Acts, the Holy Spirit crosses the barriers that divide Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ. In the Gospel, Christ-like love – the outworking of the Spirit's presence – is the essential resource that enables Jesus' friends to survive and reach beyond themselves. And in Revelation, the barrier between God and humans is finally overcome and 'the home of God is among mortals'.

A Sending Out Prayer:

May we be open enough to change,
humble enough to be changed,
and bold enough to stand by those who are radical agents
of change.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.