

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C

In today's First Reading Luke recounts an event that took place during Paul's first missionary journey. It was about the year 47AD, some 12 or 13 years after Paul's conversion. Paul was a Jew, as, of course, was Jesus, so he began preaching the Gospel to Jews when they gathered for prayer in the synagogue on the Sabbath. He spoke to them of how God was revealed in Jesus the Messiah as a God of love who wanted to welcome everyone into communion, whatever their race or culture or traditional religion. Of course people would have to change to be able to welcome God's love, and of course, God's love would bring about changes in their lives, liberating them from everything that held them bound and hindered them from living to the full. But people didn't have to become Jews. Rather, they had to become their best selves, sharing their gifts of nature and grace in building up a community of love that embraced everyone – a community in which there were no enemies, a community in which everyone was welcomed in love.

However, just as the bulk of Jesus' contemporaries rejected him, so most Jews rejected Paul's preaching. Paul decided to concentrate on reaching out to the Gentiles.

Some argue from this that Paul turned against his fellow Jews. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul continued to plead with Jews to go more deeply into their traditions and to see Jesus as the one who lived Judaism purely and perfectly, bringing it to its full flowering. Luke concludes his history of Paul's preaching with Paul under house arrest in Rome still attempting to convince his fellow Jews to follow Jesus. That was about 62AD some fifteen years after the event recorded in today's reading. Five or so years earlier, in his letter to the synagogues in Rome, Paul argued that Abraham was always meant by God to be the Father, not only of the Jews, but of many nations. If they wanted to be faithful to the mission given them by God they could continue to follow the Law, even in matters like circumcision, food laws and temple sacrifices, but they had to stop insisting that Gentiles become Jews in order to be able to receive God's saving grace.

Paul encouraged them to see in Jesus the promised Messiah who lived Judaism perfectly and in a way that was free from the cultural limitations that had developed in their history. To live Judaism as Jesus lived it meant that they had to learn that God is love, and that they had to be open to everyone, welcoming everyone, and encouraging everyone to give expression to love in their own way. Judaism as lived by Jesus was necessarily 'Catholic' – that is to say, universal – for there is only one God who is the source of everyone's life, and God was calling everyone to live to the full. Of course, everyone, including Jews, must learn to allow grace to purify them personally and to call them away from whatever was not of God in their culture. God calls us all to repentance because to live to the full we need to be free from all that holds us back. God calls us to repentance, but God calls us as *we* are, not as *others* are.

As a Jew Paul is a monotheist. As a disciple of Jesus he came to see God as wanting everyone to experience communion in love – the communion that is revealed in Jesus and is experienced, though not yet perfectly, by all who are drawn by the Spirit of Jesus into the Christian community. Paul remained convinced that God has chosen Israel for a special mission. Paul came to see that to be faithful to the covenant as a Jew he must share the faith of Abraham. He came to see that God always intended divine communion for all peoples. To cling to the Jewish

law, as Paul had done before his conversion, without sharing Abraham's faith, cannot be termed fidelity.

It is this conviction of the universal dimension of God's love that drives Paul to the ends of the known world. It is this that motivates him to do all in his power to gather all into the one community of faith, respecting God's gift of difference and rejecting all human claims to favouritism or privilege of any kind. Far from rejecting Judaism, he took up the challenge to see its promise fulfilled in the communion of love that is offered to all 'in Christ Jesus'. His struggle, the 'thorn in his flesh', is with Jews who refuse to give up their imagined privileges and who attempt to limit God to their traditions. Paul continues to invite them, as he invites everyone, to turn their eyes to look at what God has done in Jesus.

What has struck me most about Paul is the depth and intimacy of his communion with Jesus and his concern for the unity of the church in which Jew and Gentile, man and woman, free and slave, welcome each other, acknowledge each other's diverse gifts and together build a community of love inspired by the Spirit of Jesus. It all comes back to love – the love that God is, as revealed in the crucified and raised Christ. God has kept all his promises. In the communion of love that is the Christian community, we experience freedom from the only real enemy – sin, which corrupts the human heart and which makes death an instrument of separating us from the communion with God for which we are all created.

Paul's core experience was of being loved by Jesus, and it left him with a conviction of the radical importance of love. Nothing we think and nothing we do can produce good fruit unless it flows from love. This becomes especially important when we think or act in God's name. And by 'love' Paul did not mean any kind of love, but precisely God's love as expressed and made real for people in Jesus. Everything, including faith and adherence to truth, must be tested by love. Only God's love, the love of Christ poured into our hearts by his Spirit, has the power to transform the world.

Paul's writings make it clear that he understood that his mission was to tell everyone that there is a place for them in God's loving design. Thanks to Jesus, there is no need for anyone to continue in ignorance about who God really is. There is no need for anyone to remain lost in the distraction and destructiveness of sin. Each person, just by being a human being, whatever his or her social or religious background, has something to contribute to the building up of community. If they are Jews, like Jesus' first disciples and Paul himself, they are called to gather up the riches of their religious heritage as fulfilled in Jesus and to share these with the larger world of the Roman Empire. If they are not Jews, that is, if they are what the Jews called 'Gentiles', whether Greeks or Romans or any other people, they are called to bring all that is rich in their heritage into the community of Jesus' disciples.

In a way that captured the imagination of many of his contemporaries Paul saw, as many others did not see, that God really is the Father, the Mother, of all, and that God reveals in Jesus his will to draw everyone into a community in which race, social class and sexual identity would be gifts to be shared, and not inflexible realities behind which festered various forms of hatred, envy and injustice.

Today we are rightly more humble about what we think we know. We have experienced error

masquerading as truth, and we have seen through some of the things that earlier generations took as certain. We are also more respectful of opinions that differ from our own. This is good, surely. The danger is that we will get sucked into the modern error that everything is a matter of opinion, that it doesn't matter how we behave provided we don't hurt anyone. The truth matters. The truth alone will set us free. Not every idea is equally good. We are not to defend an idea because it is ours. We are meant to defend it to the extent that it is true. It was because Paul loved the religion in which he was brought up that he wanted to live it to the full, and when he discovered how Jesus lived it, that he how he wanted to live and how he challenged his Jewish contemporaries to live.

Our mission is the same. It is firstly to keep repenting of our sins and errors and to allow God's grace to purify our way of living so that we will be true disciples of Jesus in every aspect of our thinking and living. Secondly, it is to take our catholic heritage seriously. The Christian community will be truly Catholic only when every culture and every person has embraced the God revealed by Jesus. But we must be committed to the catholic vision and have a truly welcoming, open and all-embracing heart, yearning to play our part in carrying on the mission of Jesus so that the whole world, as brothers and sisters of the one God, will live in love communion, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.