

Fifth Sunday of Easter - 15th May 2022

'I give you a new commandment - that you love one another.'

In Revelation, John saw the heavenly Jerusalem descending from the sky like a huge cube. It's a startling image but one that makes sense as a visual metaphor for the promise that God will dwell with us, we will be God's people and God will be our God. The dwelling place of God is a theme that recurs in scripture. Ezekiel saw God's fiery chariot borne by four wheeled angels covered in eyes with four faces and six wings. Isaiah saw the hem of God's robe and a throne surrounded by smoke and heard flying seraphim crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts,' and the author of Psalm 148 which we sang earlier experienced all creation praising God in a great 'Alleluia.' I think they are genuine visions, honestly reported, but I'm not sure they tell us anything of the reality of the kingdom of God. They are trying to describe in finite words and images the eternal glory of God. Our hymns and anthems today continue that theme. That glorious hymn 'Light's abode, celestial Salem' is a translation from fifteenth century Latin words '*Jerusalem luminosa*', Luminous Jerusalem!

Jesus however doesn't try to describe the kingdom. He tells stories about it, likening it to everyday things: a feast; the silent energy of seed growing night and day; the action of yeast on bread; something so loved and longed for that a person would sell all he had to buy it – like a merchant buying a pearl of great price.

Jesus is talking about what Richard Rohr calls the *eros* energy of life. Rohr suggests that everything we do and the way in which we do it reveals something about what is driving us, our goals and aims and priorities. If we are filled with *eros* energy we reflect the love and goodness and truth and encouragement of God; we unconsciously build up those around us by our faith, our positivity, our smile, even our righteous anger – which might for instance be expressed as 'You can do better than that!' *Eros* energy is from God. The opposite of *eros* energy is *Thanatos*, 'death' energy which drains love and joy from the world through cynicism, discouragement, and narcissism.

Our reading from John began, 'When he had gone out.' The 'he' is Judas who had gone out into the night to betray Jesus. And yet, although he was aware of the imminent betrayal, Jesus spoke to the disciples of the key to the kingdom of heaven which is not angels, wheeled chariots and fire, but love. 'Love one another' he says three times in this short passage. Even if you are treated with cynicism and discouragement, even when you are betrayed, 'Love one another.'

The stories of atrocities coming out of Ukraine are deeply troubling. How can the people of Ukraine love in the light of such revelations? Each torture of murder has multiple victims: the one who is tortured or murdered; their partner, children and friends; the perpetrator - whose soul is damaged and who at best will suffer guilt and remorse and at worse will become de-humanised; those who watch, who may themselves sink into a spiral of torture and murder; those who watch with horror but are powerless to help and the countries in which these things happen. Countries whose people have suffered humiliation are affected for generations. Look at Israel and the islands of the Caribbean. There are also consequences for the countries whose soldiers are out of control, whose military commanders condone atrocities, whose politicians are responsible for the war and who, sooner or later will have to deal with the collective guilt of their population again, for generations. So many damaged lives and souls. Yet we are commanded to love one another.

Simon Tatton-Brown reminds us from time to time of the emphasis in the Eastern Orthodox church of the harrowing of hell. On the day after the crucifixion, Holy Saturday when the disciples and friends were all mourning, where was Jesus? The answer is suggested in a mediaeval carving in Bristol cathedral. It shows Christ reaching out a hand to pull Adam and Eve – and then and everyone else – out of hell. Simon reports seeing a Greek icon of Christ pulling Judas out of hell. On Holy Saturday Christ was in hell looking for his friend Judas, to rescue him. No one is beyond the bounds of the love of God.

God, who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, longs to dwell with us as our God in the new Jerusalem. God has already made the first moves in the relationship of love, creating us to love and coming among us as Jesus of Nazareth. As we prayed in the collect, 'Christ's wounds declare his love for the world and the wonder of his risen life.' We will celebrate at Pentecost, Christ's love loose in the world in the form of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit will work with us and with people of goodwill in Ukraine and Russia and throughout the world to slowly, painfully but inexorably reach a place where there can be forgiveness and love. Love is costly and difficult, but the love which Jesus demands from us for others, the love which searched for Judas in hell, is also the love that looks for us with love and reaches out to rescue us.