

## 28<sup>th</sup> April 2013 – Easter 5 – 9 & 10.30am Wesley Services

Theme: “Christians have differences but we are called to love as Christ has loved us.”

Readings: Acts 11:1-18 ‘Peter explains his actions of inclusion’  
John 13: 31-35 ‘Jesus gives the command ‘to love’.’

### Introduction

When I was a teenager the Vietnam War was raging and our society was polarised by those for and against Australia’s involvement in that conflict. It was indeed unfortunate that those involved in fighting that conflict were reviled by many on their return home and that war has left deep scars on many people’s lives.

The church where I attended was Rosefield Methodist Church in Adelaide and within that congregation we had the leader of many of the moratorium marches against the war, Professor John Harcourt, and the head of the Liberal Party, Jack Stacy, who strongly supported Australia’s role in the Vietnam War. The newspapers had these two men ‘pitted against each other’ with a sort of personal vendetta. Hence, as a teenager, I found it fascinating to see them both at church and both in the same church. While they sat almost on opposite sides of the church I would see them chatting together, after church, as they shared in morning tea. I would have loved to know what they talked about. The striking thing for me was that in their faith they could be united and were not fighting with each other in church. Their differences of opinion about the Vietnam War was real but so was their love of their Lord which meant they could worship in the same congregation and be civil to one another in that setting. It was a pity that the newspapers did not pick up this aspect of their faith which unified them even though they had differences. They lived out Jesus’ new commandment to: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:34/35

### Acts 11:1-18

Conflict and differing opinions occurred very early in the life of the early Christian community and we read about these in the Acts of the Apostles and in various of the Epistles. Today’s reading from Acts 11: 1-18 retells a story already told in Acts 10 such is the importance of the story. Peter is sharing his story in Jerusalem before a feisty group of critics. Never easy when you know that those you are sharing with actually hold differing opinions to your own. No issue was more debated by early Christians or more important to them than whether their new found faith was intended only for Jews or whether it was to include Gentiles while allowing them to remain Gentiles. The circumcised believers, those coming from a Jewish background, were critical of Peter, asking, “Why did you go to the uncircumcised men (those non-Jews) and eat with them?” What most disturbed the circumcised believers was table fellowship with Gentiles – entering their homes, breaking bread together at their homes. This was against Jewish food laws and against the ritual cleansing laws which the early Jewish Christians were trying to enforce. Instead of celebrating the fact ‘that the Gentiles had received the word of God’ as mentioned in Acts 11:1 there were many who were not happy with this. They wanted to control the new found faith and allowing uncircumcised Gentiles into their faith was not what they thought was correct. In a sense ‘How and why would God allow this?’ Hence Peter explains his vision of the nonkosher foods and his anxiety in visiting a nonkosher household. However he makes it clear that the voice from heaven said clearly ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ Acts 11:9 Then come the men from Cornelius’ household and Peter goes with them immediately. This is in response to Cornelius’ vision in which he is told of the messenger Peter, ‘who will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’ Acts 11: 14

This comes to be as Peter speaks to them and we read 'the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.' Acts 11:15

Peter concludes the defence of his actions with the words of verse 17; "So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" This is the 'sealer' so to speak and the uncircumcised Gentiles were accepted into the early Christian community.

#### What can we learn from this Acts passage?

1. Dissent is not necessarily a bad thing. It can open discussion and God can use that openness to grow the community of faith
2. Listen to people's stories and hear how God is working in their lives – God does 'break-in' and can change us if we are open to that change
3. God uses a variety of people and they are not always the people we might choose to do God's work
4. God can and does do the unexpected – be prepared for that!
5. God's Holy Spirit changes people and we need to allow for that

#### Brief reflection from Thomas Bandy's book 'Fragile Hope'

Thomas Bandy at the end of his book 'Fragile Hope' (pages 158-166) talks about the question 'Is there hope?' which may have many connotations such as: Will my denomination survive?

Will my church remain open?

Will Christ remain relevant?

Will spiritually alive people still be interested?

Will my grandchildren still have a great, nearby church to attend?

Bandy makes several points.

1. The hope of the church lies with the 'gentiles' – those with little or no background in the current denominational mix. This could be a little challenging for us who are relatively comfortable in our 'own' traditional church
2. The hope of the church lies with people of a variety of ethnic non-western cultural backgrounds. Again this is confronting for many of us who come from an 'Anglo background'. In the Uniting Church the fastest growing sector, particular in Sydney, has been and is the Korean congregations.
3. The hope of the church lies with courageous, networked leaders. As we in our parish look for a new ministry agent this is something for our Joint Nominating Committee to think about and consider.
4. The hope of the church lies with Christ. It was only a couple of weeks ago that we had the reading from John 21 where Jesus calls Peter. Bandy reminds us of Peter's call and in today's Acts reading we see why it is Peter who Christ calls 'to feed his sheep'. Seemingly unlikely in some ways but open to the Holy Spirit for guidance. Knowing and following Christ is so important. It helps to overcome differences that may arise in Christian communities.

#### Conclusion

May we learn that Christians can have differences but that we are called to be one in Christ, open about our differences but putting Christ before all else. This overcomes factions and gives hope for the future for God's people. Praise be to God! Amen.