

Acts 11: 1-18

Revelation 21: 1-5

John 13: 31-35

Crossing Barriers

Around 24 years ago, when I was dating my now-husband Stuart, we discovered that I had never crossed over the border and been to Wales. In fact, at that time of life, I had only ever been to France on a school trip and Spain on a family holiday. Back then, Stuart as the only driver between us decided to surprise me with a day trip to Wales one day. I was excited. I would finally see the Welsh coastline, those mountains and the valleys.

So off we went for our trip to Wales – well, our trip wasn't to the coastline or to one of the popular tourist areas of the Brecon's, the Gower or Snowdonia, but a day trip to Monmouth was planned – and Monmouth is still in Wales, albeit, just across the border!

It didn't take long to travel there, and crossing over to Wales, I noticed that some things were different. There was a new language – the Welsh language. As a dyslexic, it was a language I found challenging to read. However, the language difference fascinated me and provided much amusement as we attempted to read the words we saw displayed on the road signs.

It was wonderful to visit Wales, yet it wasn't until we were on our way home, as my now-husband was reeling off other Welsh places we could visit, that I realised that I had actually visited Wales before as a child, during a day trip to Barry Island! Oh well!

All of today's Bible readings take us on a journey of how barriers are crossed between things that are different. In Acts, the Holy Spirit crosses the barriers that divide Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ. In our 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.

In our first reading from Acts, we hear the second half of the story of Peter and Cornelius. Up until now, the Gospel has only been preached to the Jews and those of Jewish heritage. For centuries, the Jews have seen themselves as God's Chosen People, set apart from other nations to have a special relationship with the Creator. Gentiles, basically everyone who wasn't a Jew, were considered unclean. While some worshipped the Lord, they were still viewed as outsiders. Essentially, they were welcome to worship the Lord, but there was no way they were included in the Jewish community. And now here's Peter, describing a new way of seeing them. Peter in the city of Joppa, through a vision, and then through the sight

of the Holy Spirit descending on them in the same way as the first believers at the feast of Pentecost. Peter says: 'the Spirit told me to go to them and not make a distinction between them.' Peter saw the Gentiles as part of the family of God. Peter saw that the Gospel had burst through the barriers of Jew and Gentile, revealing the Good News for everyone, all people in the whole world, irrespective of their race or residence.

In Revelation 21, the appearance of the heavenly city is the culmination of the cycles of judgement and salvation in John's visions. The old heaven, earth and sea (the sea being 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 11:1-9).

In Revelation 21, we find a picture much more beautiful and inviting. A picture not of God destroying the earth and taking us to live with him in some spiritual place floating somewhere up in the sky. But of God renewing heaven and earth, and of God's place and our place becoming one, of God, living with his people, with no more separation. Just as God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the story. A place where the barrier between God and humans is finally overcome.

Today we read:

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said: 'See, I am making all things new.'

The barrier between God and humans is finally overcome. It's another barrier crossed!

More barriers are crossed in our Gospel reading from John as God's sacrificial love overcomes all human divisions as it extends into the world.

Like last week, we hear words spoken by Jesus before his death and Resurrection, during a time when the Jews were plotting to kill Jesus. Jesus, having just washed the disciples' feet, is teaching at the Last Supper. Judas has just left the room, and there is no going back now. Jesus knew what lay ahead, so he used this time to talk and explain things the disciples should already know but they failed to understand for some reason. Jesus could have used

this time to speak about many things: Fear, betrayal, and disappointment would all have been appropriate. But instead, Jesus speaks of love and service.

‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’

We know as Christians we are called to love one another. Deuteronomy chapter 6: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.’ And Jesus has spoken parables about love.

But here, during this final moment of teaching before his impending death, through crucifixion on the cross, Jesus tells us that we are love one another ‘just as I have loved you’.

Jesus is reminding us of his love for us. He has crossed the barrier for us through his death and resurrection. He has crossed the barrier for our sin and our salvation. He has crossed the barrier for us to have a relationship with the Father.

It wasn’t just in that moment that Jesus showed his love for us. God came to earth as a human being, born through a virgin, lived a life of poverty, and was a refugee fleeing for safety. He preached among people who just didn’t get it. He healed, comforted, and taught about a new way of living, crossing boundaries and loving everyone, no matter the differences. He was mocked, tortured and killed.

And why did he do this? He did this to show his love for us and demonstrate how we should love one another – loving others just as he has loved us.

Sometimes as human beings, we turn our differences with others into barriers. These barriers sometimes stop us from fully loving others, caring for them and attending to their needs. These barriers prevent us from sharing the Gospel with those who are different. Why do we do this? Are we afraid of what is ‘different’? Are we afraid to cross the barrier between us and those who are different?

Those of the other gender, a different age. A different race or religion. A different social class, sexuality. Those whose theology is different to ours.

Are we afraid to love as Jesus loved us with those who are refugees, asylum seekers, addicts, those who are homeless?

Do we see our differences as a barrier?

Are we afraid of the need to change and the need to be changed?

Do we need to see the truth in Peter’s words: ‘Who was I, that I could hinder God?’ meaning that who are we to stop others from receiving the same gifts from God which we have received. The gift of the Holy Spirit. Gifts of love, grace, mercy, joy, peace and much more. Who are we to hinder God by creating barriers between us and those who are different? Who are we to create barriers which stop others from hearing a Gospel message of love, grace and mercy?

It's not just about what we do; it's about the way and attitude we do it. It's about loving with a Jesus-type love, which is self-emptying and entirely focussed on the one who is loved. It's the type of love that washes the feet of the person you know is going to betray you to an unjust and violent end. That is the new way of loving that Jesus is commanding us to do.

This week is Christian Aid week. You would have been given a donation envelope as you came into church today. Maybe God is asking us to do what we can, offering our prayers or financial donations to help those like Jessica in Zimbabwe, where the climate crisis is causing aching hunger for families. The combined effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, conflict, and drought have robbed her of the power to provide for her children. And 7,000 miles away, the war in Ukraine will drive up food prices in Zimbabwe and around the globe. Vulnerable families will be pushed even deeper into hunger without the fertiliser and food, like wheat and cooking oil, that Ukraine and Russia produce. But hope lives in us. We can help cross the boundary between those who have plenty and those who are hungry. With every gift that Christian Aid receives, every action and every prayer, we can celebrate and share hope with our sisters and brothers from Ukraine to Zimbabwe facing this crisis around the world.

So, today, this week, may we all listen for the different ways God takes the initiative to cross through the barriers caused by differences. Like in Acts, through the work of the Spirit, in the Gospel reading, through Jesus' new commandment, and in Revelation, with the coming of the new Jerusalem. May we build bridges and not walls. May we all love as he loved us as we cross the barriers to share the Gospel message with others.

Let us pray:

God of all,

change can be exciting and threatening,

division can be dangerous and protective,

beliefs can be safe and stifling,

difference can be fun and frightening.

Help us to discern the difference,

and to be a helper, not a hinderer to the work and growth of your kingdom.

In Jesus' name, we pray,

Amen.