

HOMILY FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

When we read the New Testament, we tend to forget that much of what is written was being read for the first time in the midst of struggle and persecution for the early Church. What had happened in the Holy Land, was being read in Rome, for instance, years later, as the scrolls of the Gospels and the letters finally came to light.

Around the time that the Book of Acts was being read in Rome, Emperor Nero had begun persecuting the Christians. These Christians were reading about a Roman Centurion, a pagan, receiving the Holy Spirit and later being Baptised with water by the Apostle Peter. The Holy Spirit was moving into areas where Christians themselves dared not tread and, the Holy Spirit had called Peter to come to this place.

Around the time that John's Gospel and John's letter would have begun to be read, rumours abounded about the emperor Domitian persecuting Christians. In the midst of this, how challenging it must have been for them to read, "Anyone who fails to love can never have known God," and, "Love one another as I have loved you."

So, there is no doubt that love can be difficult and that love for one's enemies requires a certain level of commitment which goes well beyond love for one's friends. Even Jesus acknowledged in the Gospel that laying down one's life for friends has benefits within that group of friends.

However, he called them to more – they were to go out and bear fruit, fruit that would last. The command to love one another was not simply for the enclosed group of friends. It was about laying down one's life – laying down one's pride and selfishness to treat others with the respect of being equals.

We saw this with Peter. The Roman Centurion, Cornelius had received a vision and, in that vision, he was told to fetch a man named Simon, known as Peter. Soon after, Peter had a vision of unclean and clean animals gathered together and taken into heaven on a white sheet - perhaps representing the white garment of Baptism. Peter must have really wondered why he was being called to the house of a Roman Centurion and what might happen to him.

It was Cornelius who fell at the feet of Peter leaving Peter to say, "I am only a man after all." Peter realised the meaning of the visions – that he and Cornelius were equals. Love had to embrace them both, even though they were, technically, enemies. God called them together.

This story revealed how the Holy Spirit did not simply wait for the Church to respond. The Holy Spirit was moving amongst those who were considered enemies of the Church. Peter, as a representative of the Christian faith, received them through Baptism. Imagine the persecuted Christians later being called through the words of Scripture to look for the presence of God in the Romans and engage with them, lovingly. That's tough Christianity. Do they make them like that anymore?

John's letter shows that love is the movement of God within us. We may think we know what love is but, until we present it to our enemies, we cannot know it fully. Love must involve sacrifice. Paul reminded us what love looks like with his well-known words of the

meaning of love from First Corinthians. Inspired by his knowledge of Jesus he said that love is patient, kind, never jealous, not boastful or conceited, never rude or takes advantage, takes offence or stores up grievances. It has a practicality which can be expressed to enemies, especially when we treat them as our equals. It may not always involve the same warmth as love for our friends.

However, love becomes the fruitfulness of our friendship with Jesus. We may not have the enemies the early Christians were dealing with but, we don't want to make any either.