

Sixth Sunday of Easter (Rogation Sunday) – May 9, 2021  
St. Clement's Church  
Acts 10:44-48, Psalm 98, John 15:9-17

From Advent onwards, there are many rich contours to the Christian year, and perhaps you are drawn to some seasons more than others. I have myself increasingly come to appreciate these seven weeks of Eastertide. Although I haven't seen it described as such in any of the lectionaries I have consulted, I think Eastertide can accurately be called a very Tiggerish time of the year.

Tigger, as you will remember from your reading of Winnie-the-Pooh, is irrepressible, bouncy and full of enthusiasm. He is the very epitome of springtime, when buds are bursting out on the trees, animals are born, and all the world is young. We have to hand it to him for enthusiastically sharing his thoughts and feelings with everyone he meets, and in that perhaps he serves as a mascot for all we who are charged with sharing the good news of the risen Christ – though, admittedly, we probably wouldn't want to come across quite as strong as he does.

But you may recall something else about Tigger. As he tells us in song and dance in the Disney version, the most wonderful thing about Tiggers, besides having tops made of rubber and bottoms made of spring, and being being bouncy and pouncy and fun-fun-fun-fun-fun, well, the most wonderful thing about Tiggers, he says, is "I'm the only one!"

So perhaps these weeks of Tiggertide, I mean Eastertide, give us the perfect opportunity to remember afresh – or perhaps notice for the first time – all that makes our Christian faith – just like Tigger – one of a kind. Now I don't believe that Christianity is the only path to the One God, but I do believe it is a unique path. And it behooves us to notice what is distinctive, or exciting, or particular about Christianity if we want to keep our own faith fresh or find words to offer it to someone else.

Let's look at today's readings and think just a little about some of the revolutionary aspects of Christianity. In the book of Acts, Peter is, like the other apostles, travelling and building up the young church, and as we come to this passage he is lodging with a friend in Joppa. While there, Peter goes to the rooftop one noontime and has a thrice-repeated vision during which he experiences God giving him permission to eat all manner of animals and other creatures that he is shown. Because this will violate Jewish dietary laws, Peter protests, but God says "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Peter is left greatly puzzled, and just then the Spirit tells him to notice the three men at the gateway to the house who are looking for him.

Peter invites them to come in and they explain that their master, a Gentile named Cornelius, was directed by an angel to send for Peter and to hear what he had to say. With God's instruction that none are to be called profane ringing in his ears, Peter

invites the men to come in and despite the fact that they are not of his religion he puts them up for the night and travels with them the next day to Caesarea.

When he arrives at Cornelius's home, Peter points out to him that it is unlawful for Jews to mingle with Gentiles. But Cornelius explains the message he received from an angel and says to Peter "Therefore I have sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

Peter then says "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," and he testifies that the good news is for people in all nations. And then, as we heard this morning in the lesson, the Holy Spirit fell on all the Gentiles listening, which astounded the Jewish people who were travelling with Peter.

I like this story because it reminds us that Christianity was at that time astonishing in its message that God did not "belong" to any one nation or people. We know from our reading of ancient religions that the thought of God being, as Paul puts it, equally just and loving to "Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free," was groundbreaking – and it is still revolutionary today, given our human tendency to focus on what divides rather than gathers us.

And I also like the way this conversation played out. Cornelius sent for Peter, and, as Cornelius phrases it, Peter was "kind enough" to come. Each in their turn offers hospitality to the other. Peter does not attempt a forced conversion of Cornelius; on the other hand, he doesn't hide the light he carries under a bushel. Despite his initial qualms about meeting with the Gentiles, Peter gets over his reticence and in telling the story of Jesus he shares the gift he himself has been given. I don't have to tell you that in the centuries that followed, the Church's evangelizing strayed tragically far from this non-coercive graciousness too often, but it is a model we to which we should continue to strive.

And in the gospel passage, the extraordinary message that stands out for me is that we are not just God's creation, we are God's friends. Jesus tells his disciples – and by extension all of us – that we are servants no longer, but friends; that his joy will be in us, and will make our joy complete. And I think this, too, is a uniquely Christian relationship with God, one that we perhaps may either take for granted, or perhaps, not quite know what to do with.

For what does it mean to be friends with God? It is indeed a bold claim to make. And it is one that is hard to fully understand or live up to. What kind of friendship can we expect, or offer, to a divine human who hasn't walked the earth in two millennia?

*What a Friend We Have in Jesus* is a hymn that may likely be springing to your mind right about now. The verses focus on our ability to achieve peace of mind by taking our cares and sorrows to God in prayer. And that is, indeed, one blessing of a deep friendship.

But that's not Jesus's definition of friendship, at least not in this gospel passage. Jesus says his friendship with his disciples is grounded in their mutual understanding of all he has taught them about God. "If you keep my commandments," Jesus tells them, "you will abide in my love." Now, that might sound rather conditional – do what I say, or else – but what is it that Jesus is commanding? It isn't to worship him, or sing his praises, or build a new church. His simple command is "To love one another, as I have loved you." Imagine what a world it would be if all of Jesus's friends took that as seriously as we might.

I spent some time this week wondering what it is to be a friend to someone whose earthly presence is long past. And my thoughts took me to my ongoing friendship with my long-departed grandfather Alick, because I hold him in what could be described as an unreasonable, not-quite-rational affection. After all, I was only nine when he died and I have no recollection of long conversations or particularly memorable encounters. But he is someone I think of frequently and remember fondly, and who continues to provide an active inspiration despite our paths having crossed for so short a time. Why is this? What feeds our ongoing relationship?

I suspect it is because we both care, or cared, a great deal about the same things. He took great joy in the life of the Church and in sharing that joy with others. He knew every psalm by heart, loved hosting and visiting friends and parishioners, would never say no to a good costume party, basked in books, and was dedicated to his ministry with young people. He had a lively mind, a good sense of humour, and a ready merriment that were always put to use for the greater good.

So perhaps sharing a common mission is what anchors the relationship between us. And what feeds that relationship over the years is this: I am told stories about Granddad that inspire me. I have access to his sermon archive – and his handwritten joke books – that teach me a little about what he believed. I make room in my head and heart to think about him with affection and curiosity. I carry on the tradition – the ritual, one might say – of hosting family Boxing Day parties and Easter Egg hunts that he and my grandmother started some 50-plus years ago.

In the church we use all these same means – narrative, ritual, and community life – to foster the friendship with Jesus that he offered to us so remarkably all those years ago. But foundational to that friendship is caring about the same things that Jesus cared about most deeply – that we love God and love one another.

So as we enter the last few weeks of Eastertide, I encourage you to think anew about what it is that makes the Christian story unique; what it means to be offered friendship with God and to know that that offer is extended to everyone, with no exceptions. To imagine what it means to partner with God in making real in the world a love that has its roots in the heavens.

I hope you let the Easter story excite you. I hope you let it inspire you. And I hope it puts a real spring in your step, because if ever there was a time to let your inner Tigger out, this is surely the time of the liturgical year to do it.

- *The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen*