

Our Epistle reading in Acts describes one of the pivotal moments in the New Testament. The moment in time when the Gentiles joined the Jewish followers of the Way. For hundreds of years, God had been preparing for this to happen. In the writing of the prophet Isaiah we hear

“Nations that do not know you shall run to you because of the Lord your God.”

An Italian was the first member of a foreign nation to join the Jewish believers. Cornelius was a Roman soldier based in Caesarea, the home of the Roman Governor of the province. Almost certainly the Italian Cohort was sent to that area for strategic reasons. Local troops mostly raised in Syria might have been considered less reliable in an area where the native population was often hostile. Even so Cornelius was entranced by the Jewish faith.

“He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously.. and prayed constantly.”

When Peter was requested to come from Joppa to give his testimony concerning Jesus, God Himself intervened. Even while Peter was still speaking

“The Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and all his household.”

The Jewish believers who had come to Caesarea from from Joppa with Peter

“Were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.”

The fact that these Romans, with their reputation for polytheism, a belief in many Gods, and beliefs in spirits and sprites, should be called home to the living God was shocking. For the Jewish believers it came as a massive culture shock.

The Holy Spirit, who fell on Cornelius and his family and household on that day, is the Person who expresses the love of God. This flows out to embrace the whole world. We often think of love as an emotion. Perhaps something like a great storm, that seems to come from nowhere, and blows us away. It may be like this. Perhaps for Cornelius it was. The love that Jesus offers us all in our Gospel reading in John may not be that sort of roller coaster. It is often experienced as steady, deep and calm. The love of Jesus abides in the heart. It is a constant.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love.”

Abide is a very homely word. It means 'staying with', 'living with'. God's love is creative. When we live with someone or something, we begin to understand hidden depths.

One person who has examined hidden depths is Professor Suzanne Simard. Brought up in Canada in the midst of the forests of the Monashee Mountains she began to feel that the clear felling of trees was wrong. After studying forest ecology and conducting research in nine forests, she discovered that trees in old forests live in a connected society.

“They trade and collaborate and interact in sophisticated ways as a cohesive, holistic community.” Suzanne calls this the 'wood wide web.' and explains that it consists of fungi as well as tree roots. For her fellow scientists, this discovery was a culture shock. Asked why so much push back, Suzanne replied  
“There has been a separation of humanity from nature, mind from body, spirit from intellect. We have moved away from a more holistic, spiritual way of seeing us and our world.”

It has not always been so. In our Psalm we can see this linkage between God, the natural world and the human spirit.

“Let the sea roar, and all that fills it.  
Let the hills sing together for joy.”

On the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter we meditated with Canon Brian on the vine and its branches. Our Gospel reading continues that theme. The love that Jesus speaks of comes from the Father, and flows like sap rising in the vine in early Spring .It is expressed in Jesus' love for all his disciples. Its end is the Cross, when Jesus died for us, and the Resurrection, when he is glorified by the Father. It is a love for sharing, between the believer and her Lord, and between members of Christ's body the Church.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”  
We are chosen for love, and called for joy.

Professor Simard explains in her research that a forest flourishes because of the presence of mature trees which carry the wisdom of the forest. She calls them 'Mother Trees'. Their roots form an underground network with the fungi to create a kind of forest wide brain.  
“They are the hubs of communication, protection and sentience. They nurture their offspring and they provide information to help generations of trees to survive.”

Like the image of the vine and its branches, the characteristics of the forest provides a picture of what a Christian community might be like. Interconnected at a deep level, nurturing, responsive to the needs of everyone.

Henri Nouwen teaches us that being called to be children of God involves growing up. We too must become mothers and fathers in Christ. Like the mother trees in the forest, this growing up may take us a lifetime.