

## **Readings for the Fifth Sunday of Easter**

18<sup>th</sup> May 2025

### First Reading: Acts 1:1-18

The apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

### Second Reading: Revelation 21:1-6

I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “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.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

### Gospel: St John 13:31-35

During the supper, when Judas had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” 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.'

### **A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Easter**

*From Rev'd David Higgon*

Jesus said to his followers. 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I love you.... By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Have you ever considered what a real challenge Jesus has set before us, not only that we love one another but that we love as he loves us. Surely such a depth of unconditional love seems beyond most of us; to love others, the stranger, the alien, our neighbours, with the same intensity as we love the special ones in our lives, seems a rare gift given to a few very special women and men, some of whom are canonised as saints by the church.

Recently, I have been reading about someone, who in 1878 as a young man of 25 yrs of age was training for the ministry in London, and he wrote to his brother about a sermon that he was preparing – his first sermon;

*'Love is the best and noblest thing especially when it is tested by life, as gold is tested by fire. Happy is he who has loved much and is sure of himself, and although he may have wavering and doubted, he has kept the divine spark alive and has returned to the beginning and ever shall be. If only one keeps loving faithfully what is truly worth loving and does not squander one's love on trivial insignificant and meaningless things then one will gradually obtain more light and grow stronger'*

The young man in question never achieved his desire to become a minister of religion and eventually turned his talents elsewhere. At the age of 26 he decided to train as an artist and in just over 10 years he became one of the world's greatest artists.

What never left him was that divine spark, a belief in the power of love and in his unwavering belief that that power of love was personified in Jesus Christ. His respect for the clergy and the church as an institution certainly diminished, to the extent that a few years after that letter to his brother, he wrote that the god of the clergy was as dead as a doornail. He asked himself the question, *'does this make me an atheist – the clergy consider me one, but you see I love and how could I feel love if I was not alive myself or if others were not alive, and if we are alive, there is something wonderful about it and that something is God or is as good as God'*.

The man I am speaking of was Vincent Van Gogh. Most of us know him for his paintings of sunflowers and of starry nights, and of course because he cut off his ear in a bout of madness.

His letters to his brother Theo reveal a man with a deep love and regard for others, friends and strangers, and a passionate love of life and of nature and of art. This love was expressed in his generosity to others in his understanding that the unconditional love of God extended to the unconditional love of others. For Vincent love could only be recognised as love in action, he would never recognise love that was not an action. At one time he went off to serve as a missionary to coal miners in the Borinage district of Belgium. He found miners who were sick and starving, living a bleak existence, without adequate food, water or warm clothing. A mining explosion had left many in a horrible condition. In response to their plight, Vincent gave away everything he owned, including most of his

clothing. To tend to their medical needs, he ripped up his own bed sheets for bandages and he gave his own lodging over to a distressed family and he himself slept on straw on the ground. Those responsible for his ministry training were alarmed at his actions and his training was terminated because he showed too excessive a zeal for evangelism and because he did not dress in a way that was appropriate for a minister or preach eloquently.

Many who have written about Vincent claim he lost his faith, but it is clear from his letters that he loved Jesus intensely right up to the end of his life. He said that it was Christ alone amongst all the wisemen who could offer eternal life.

As you would expect, his letters are filled with descriptions of the paintings he was working on and of the colours of the landscapes that he is painting. In these descriptions, you find expressions of a spirituality that he found in the whole of nature; he wrote of trees especially as if they were a soul. He identified in nature the human condition, for example, he wrote of the trampled grass on the side of the road seeming to be as tired and dusty as people from the backstreets. For him, love is the germination force in every human being. He looked at the germinating force in the natural world and he saw that what that germinating force is to the grain, love is to us.

In 1886 van Gogh found sunflowers thrown in a street gutter in Paris. He went home and painted these beautiful cast-off flowers, in a way that they appear to be transformed through the love of the artist. In a sense his various paintings of sunflowers show the redeeming power of love, as Jesus through his love shows us redemption.

If you look at Van Gogh's paintings of the starry sky at night you could say that the stars too are painted like flowers. There is an interaction between the earth and heaven. It is as if heaven is reaching down to us.

There is abundant evidence in Vincent's letters and his works of art that an abiding faith in Jesus Christ remained to the end of his life, even as his health and behaviour deteriorated. Surprisingly, most of his Christian-themed paintings appeared in the last three years of his life, for example his painting *Pietà*, the lamentation of Jesus Christ, which shows the dead Christ in the arms of his mother.

Vincent Van Gogh is never going to be canonised for his saintly behaviour. He loved and lived with the type of women whom, as he said himself, the clergy condemned from the pulpit, and after drinking a large quantity of alcohol, absinthe, Vincent slashed off a portion of his ear. His heavy drinking and his physical neglect of himself may have contributed to his increasing epileptic seizures and to increasing bouts of mental illness that led to him spending long periods in institutions. He died at the age of 37 after apparently shooting himself. For me there is no doubt that the love that he wrote of in his letters, as love in action, was the force that drove his art. Through his art, and through his troubled life, he serves as an example of how to love others as Jesus loves us. Such love can be achieved by those who are considered to be sinners, as well as those the church lauds as saints. And I give thanks that it is so - because it casts a light into the darkness that surrounds us and gives hope to the likes of you and me that we too have the capacity to love others as our lord loves us. Jesus gave to all of us, sinners and saints alike, a new commandment, that we love one another just as he loves us. As he said, it is by this that everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.