

Great St Mary's Cambridge: Sermon: 18 May 2025 (Easter 5)

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Acts 11.1-18

Now the apostles and the believers^a who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers^b criticized him, ³saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵'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. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." ⁸But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.^c These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁷If 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?' ¹⁸When 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.'

aGk *brothers* bGk lacks *believers* cOr *not to hesitate*

John 13.31-35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ 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." ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

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Today, the Sunday of our Annual Parochial Church Meeting, is a Sunday when we focus on the life of our church with its ministry, mission and the stewardship that underpins this.

Ever since I arrived at Great St Mary's, I have been amazed at the opportunities our location in the centre of Cambridge offers us a church to fulfil the vision of the gospel, opportunities to be the people God is calling us together to be; opportunities to do those loving actions that reveal God's call and embrace of the world around us.

We are in a city that has international appeal, attracting people from across the world; just look around at the rich diversity of people we are. You even have a German vicar! As a parish we are blessed with two beautiful historic buildings; we are the University Church and a place for worship and gathering for the civic leaders of our city and for many organisations – this afternoon, we are hosting a Christian Aid 80th anniversary service-; and, we are a major tourist attraction. People come to Great St Mary's from many walks of life, of varied ages and backgrounds – so we are indeed a place where strangers meet and become friends. When I look across the congregations, today or on any Sunday or feast day, we are a house of people who once were strangers becoming friends - brought together by the God who created us and who gives us a new commandment to live by: to love one another as God loves us.

At the beginning of the week, our Prime Minister caused headlines when he talked about the danger of Britain becoming an island of strangers. There have been many comments and reactions, and I, too, have been reflecting on this. From the prime minister's statement, one gets the impression that the idea of 'being strangers' or meeting strangers is something negative or to be avoided, when in fact, for Christians, it is an opportunity, one of those we have in great abundance here in Great St Mary's, an opportunity to welcome those who are strangers to us, and in doing that be drawn more deeply into the God's will for the world.

As part of my reflections this week I saw that enabling strangers, people from different families, tribes and nations, to live together, to recognise their common humanity is a powerful thread in the bible and at the heart of God's vision and purposes, at the heart of God's Kingdom, of what we pray for in the Lord's prayer. Right from the book of Genesis when Abraham is called to leave his home and become a nomad, therefore a 'stranger' in the land he ends up in, to Jesus who in John's gospel proclaimed that by his death he would draw everyone to himself. This compelling message is explicit again after Jesus'

resurrection, when he commissions his disciples to proclaim the good news to all the nations. In three weeks' time, we will celebrate the feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes upon the Church. The first thing the Holy Spirit does is to enable them to speak in other languages, to break down the barrier of being strangers, to connect people and help them discover the gift of each other.

The vision of the gospel, the vision of God is that people love one another, irrespective of where they come from and who they are; a vision that encourages people to be open to one another and celebrate our common humanity in difference. The vision of the gospels is for people to see each other as brothers or sisters. This is at the heart of the vision of being the Church and being part of a church.

Overcoming our strangeness to one another takes courage. We all know that. I know that as a foreigner in my adopted land. It takes courage to go up to someone we don't know and introduce ourselves. It takes lots of courage if they seem so different from us that we are not sure what we will have in common. We have to overcome our nervousness, indeed our fear. And it is fear that keeps people strangers, and shuts people off from one another, and it is fear that leads to suspicion, and then we are on the slippery path to treating the stranger as less than an equal human being, less than a person just as created by and just as beloved by God.

It is the calling of the Church, of us, not to be strangers to one another, but to model, in fact to embody, what it means not to be strangers, and to love one another. And it is not for us to create barriers, of who is in and who is out. That is the opposite of God's longing for the church and for the world.

Our first Reading today from the Acts of the Apostles provides a powerful example of how this was worked out in the early church, when Peter and his fellow apostles, who were Jews had to learn and fully accept that God was at work among and calling Gentiles just as God was at work among and calling Jews. Peter's vision revealed to him that God loves everything and everyone that God has made, and Peter, and so we, are to do the same.

This is not just for our own sake, but for the sake of God's mission for the whole world, to show and share what it is to overcome our fears and to reach out and connect through the love which God reveals to us in Jesus. So much of our world desperately needs to see fear can indeed be overcome with love, and I believe God is calling the Church to show that in the world, and us here in Great St Mary's to show that through the opportunities God is placing before us.

This is why I think with much gratitude of this Church, beginning with our worship, by which God draws us all together, young and old, the devout and the explorer, the lifelong member and the person just stepped off the street, and transforms us together into the body of Christ, a place where we taste and see God's love.

This is why we are thankful for our care for one another and for our buildings; for the pastoral care that we offer for those in need, the lost, the depressed, the lonely, the sick, the bereaved, showing and sharing God's love, love between brothers and sisters, not strangers. This is why we are thankful for the opportunities we have to welcome in, and to reach out, to make connections with our neighbours near and far, and in all of this together to embody God's longing for humanity that no one is a stranger, and all are children of God. And, with the help of the Holy Spirit, by the grace of God, others might know 'that we are his disciples, if we have love for one another.'

Amen.