

Acts 11. 1-8. John 13.31-35

After the death of Pope Francis on Easter Monday, I nerded out on the Papal election. Like many people I'm fascinated by the Conclave and what happens inside the Sistine Chapel, not least because the system of electing a Pope is so much more efficient than our own lumbering system for appointing a new Archbishop of Canterbury. As part of my obsession, I rewatched my favourite film of last year, Conclave, and reread the book -twice! I did tell you that I was a nerd!

In both the book and the film our protagonist Cardinal Lomeli or Lawrence, as he's called in the film, gives a pre-Conclave homily where he ditches his script and speaks from his heart. He says "certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance" He goes on to say that faith is a living thing that requires doubt, and that true faith embraces both mystery and doubt.

These are wise words for all of us, and most particularly today for those who are being baptised. They also reflect Peter's experience in our reading from Acts this morning. Just for a few moments, put yourself into Peter's shoes. Three years ago you had a small fishing business in Capernaum in Galilee. Your life followed a predictable pattern and then one day you met this itinerant rabbi and your life was turned upside down. The old certainties were gone and you found a new set. You would follow this man to the ends of the earth, you would stand up for him, and you would never let any harm happen to him. That was, until all those certainties were blown away and your friend was arrested. You found yourself denying him and pretending that you never knew him. And then he died on a cross. It was all over, everything you thought you knew

during those past three years was gone. But, and of course it's a very big but, the world span again and the man you knew to be dead was alive. It was time for you to tell others. The others you would tell would be the people of your own tribe. People like you who followed the Jewish Law, ate the right foods, followed the same hygiene routines.

Can you imagine how Peter must have felt when he has this vision telling him that all that certainty around tribe, belonging, laws and ritual is now open to question? The exceptionalism that had been so much a part of his culture had been challenged. Difference and diversity were to be embraced. God's love is for everyone.

Beliefs, rules, rituals and etiquette are all mechanisms that can be used for exclusion and intolerance. I'm not in any way saying here that what we believe or how we behave doesn't matter. I am saying that we need to attend to how we use belief and behaviour.

Beliefs and behaviour can feed our egos. They can help us to feel superior to others. To know who is in and who is out. I remember back in 2009 reading an appalling article about President and Michelle Obama's first presidential visit to the UK. Michelle Obama was disparaged for two things. Firstly that she wore a cardigan to a meeting with the Queen, and secondly that she put her hand on the Queen's back. The article was clearly stating that Michelle Obama is 'not one of us.' She doesn't know how to behave and obviously she would have upset the Queen. It's interesting to note that history actually records that the two women got on very well, so much so that the Queen invited Michelle to bring her two daughters over for a private visit to Buckingham Palace. No doubt the writer of the disparaging article felt very superior and pleased with themselves, but they didn't do much to contribute to unity, tolerance and love.

As we have heard in today's gospel reading, just before he died, Jesus left his disciples with what he called 'a new commandment'. "That you love one another as I have loved you". This was a radical, sacrificial love that loved without borders. The disciples would have watched Jesus socialise with those who were thought of as sinners. Those that weren't of their tribe. And there's something profound here about presence. Jesus states that he is going where they cannot go, so it's incumbent upon them to carry on his work – his work to love in the here and now. To be in those places, to reach out to those people, that are excluded and on the margins.

Each of you being baptised today is at the beginning of a new journey. You are joining the worldwide family of the Church with all its flaws, weakness, and beautiful diversity. Your journeys will each be different, you will experience different joys and challenges along the way. You will each find different ways to express and live out your faith, and as you journey on, we will pray that you will be constantly enfolded in the all-embracing love of God. But you've also taken on a responsibility (for the little ones it's your god parents that have taken that responsibility until you are old enough to embrace it for yourselves). In responding to God's invitation to be baptised you are following in the footsteps of Peter and every other disciple who has come since. You will have your doubts and struggles. There will be times when everything you thought you knew will be turned upside down. But embracing uncertainty, doubt, and mystery will help you to withstand the shocks that life can often throw at us. You are also responding to Jesus' commandment to love and to be available and present to those who are different from you. Whilst these encounters may not always be straightforward, they offer an opportunity for you to be curious about people and for you to contribute to the positive impact the reconciling love of God has on the world.

This calling is for all of us, and in a few moments we will all be invited to join our voices with those of our baptism candidates in recommitting ourselves to following Christ and rejecting all that divides us from God and our neighbours. In a world that is so polarized and fractured, the call to question our certainties and love radically outside our own tribes is as relevant now as it's always been.