

## SERMON for Easter 7 - May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

Readings: Acts 1: 6-14; Psalm 68: 1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 5; John 17: 1-11.

What rich pickings we have in this week's readings!

From our first reading, we hear of the Ascension of Jesus - a day the church remembered last Thursday - the day when Jesus, as the Nicene Creed puts it, "ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." We heard the conversation with the disciples prior to Jesus leaving them - "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" - they STILL don't get it! Instead, as Jesus disappears, they are told to go back to Jerusalem and wait - wait to receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our psalm this morning talks about God's power and glory, and yet also his compassion and mercy - about the Father to the fatherless, upholding the widow and giving the desolate a home etc.

The fifth chapter of Peter's first letter is not only great advice for the leaders within any fellowship but also for anyone who seeks to follow Christ.

Humble yourself under God's mighty hand (v 6), cast all your anxiety on God (v 7), be disciplined and alert (v 8) and greet one another with a kiss of love (v 14).

And finally we have this morning's gospel and what has become known as "the high priestly prayer" - Jesus' prayer for himself, his disciples and all who would follow him throughout the ages to come. In it Jesus prays that through him and his work, God would be glorified, he prays for his followers that they may be strengthened and remain unified.

So many threads!

I would like to initially focus on Jesus' prayer, as we heard in the gospel.

Years ago I had a profound experience when meditating on the beginning of this passage.

Let's first put it in its correct context: Jesus is with his disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem - they are just about to go out to the Garden of Gethsemane, but before they go, Jesus prays. He is aware that his time is running short. He has just been offering his disciples words of comfort and encouragement, when he turns in prayer to God:

Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. [John 17: 1b-5]

"... glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed" ... wow! I remember experiencing for the first time the profound impact of those words and realised that Jesus may have been experiencing an incredible longing for the pain and the suffering of this life to be over and he be once again in peace and serenity, again at one with the Father.

Then he prays for his disciples, for their protection and that they be one - unified. How the Father's heart must break at the division and hatred that is so prevalent in the world today. How quick are people at deflecting responsibility for things - seeing who the finger can be pointed at, who to blame, political aggression causing conflict, either country to country or civil unrest, or taking pre-emptive, defensive strike through trade wars etc.

At a faith level, that is not even taking into account the disunity within the wider Church, the greater fellowship of all believers, with all the bickering about who's doctrine is right, who has the greatest share of the truth and so on. I am sure we often forget that we are all

children of God, each trying to find our way to a relationship with God which seems right, which honours and glorifies God.

In our first reading, following Jesus' ascension, the disciples were told to return to Jerusalem and wait to receive the Holy Spirit. I have often wondered whether they really understood what to expect, what they were in for. We tend to forget, however, that in the Church's calendar there are 10 days between Ascension and Pentecost. Ten days is a long time to wait for something, especially when you are not sure what you are waiting for.

Luckily for us, the disciples were obedient in this time of uncertainty. They were told to go back to Jerusalem (and they did!), they were told to wait (and they did!) and as they waited, they prayed together, worshipped God and experienced in fellowship and community, a sense of "church" and their reliance on God. And in their waiting, they were in unity, while the waited they prayed and were able to discern God's will for them to choose a twelfth disciple to replace Judas Iscariot.

The other day, when I was reflecting on these readings, the disciples' comment from our Acts reading jumped out at me:

Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel? [Acts 1:6b]

And Jesus' response:

It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." [Acts 1:7-8]

It struck me that perhaps this is what today's faith communities are called to do, to be Christ's witnesses is the world, to restore, not the kingdom of Israel, but to restore the whole of creation!

Too big a job, you may cry!

But in these days between Ascension and Pentecost, I would encourage you to pray. Pray as the disciples prayed, together and in unity. Pray for peace, pray for unity, pray for the healing of the world, pray with expectation for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all God's children. Pray also for the world to be transformed into a relationship of love and respect - like the one which exists between the Father and the Son - a relationship of unity - and that is not saying that each one of us need to be a clone of the next, but celebrating the common ground we hold.

So I would like to end with a prayer for unity, a prayer which can be used each day between now and next Sunday, whether we pray it with the world situation in mind, or for peace and unity in our own community, our own congregation, our own family. And in praying this prayer, it brings together all the threads of waiting and longing in hope for a better world.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, you have called us in the Body of your Son Jesus Christ to continue his work of reconciliation and reveal you to the world: forgive us the sins which tear us apart; give us the courage to overcome our fears and to seek that unity which is your gift and your will; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. <sup>1</sup>

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21<sup>st</sup> May, 2023.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS::

1. From *Common Worship*.