

Sunday 29th May 2022
Easter 7 (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 16.16-34
NT: Revelation 22.12-14,16-17,20-end
G: John 17.20-end

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of all those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, as you, Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me”.

We might think that the lectionary is preparing us for the feast of Pentecost next Sunday, the gift of the Holy Spirit that allows the disciples to communicate to those they thought they can't communicate with them, just who Jesus is – one with the Father. But, in fact Jesus at this stage in the gospel is praying for his disciples in preparation for his death. Earlier he addressed his disciples, telling them that he shall not leave them as orphans, as the story moves to his arrest. He had also earlier warned Peter that he is not going to be able to make it with him, but rather he is going to deny him three times.

The disciples are witnessing events that will draw them away from what they are used to; they are seeing into a depth and a mystery into the life of Jesus that would take them into a very distant place and that will form them into the new community of the Church. The disciples will also go where they do not want to go. They too must have their journey to the cross. And Jesus prays for them after telling them not to let their hearts be troubled. He had provided the peace, and the Father will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. So, in one passage from John's gospel, we have the preparation of Jesus' death, a foretaste of his victory and of Pentecost at the same time.

All of this shows that the events surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the foundation and cause of the Church's existence. The Church does not exist because of a gathering of those who agree on certain abstract ideas, or moral teachings. The Church is not the gathering of the righteous either. The Church exists simply because of the death and resurrection of Christ – the new creation. This is what makes the disciples 'go out'. Jesus said earlier: "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do". Stepping into the fellowship of Christ means going out, stepping out, connecting with those whom we thought we can't speak with, to where the cross is to be found, as Paul connects with the slave girl in our first lesson, allowing her to restore her dignity, even if it meant his facing trial. In Acts, we follow and hear stories of the apostles, acting out in the light of the Resurrection and of Pentecost. Jesus' departure to his death tells us that in the depth of his vulnerable human life, even in his very mortality, there is peace and a new world, there is a vision of the new Jerusalem where Christ is the Alpha and the Omega as we heard in our second reading.

What does this mean for us? First, it means that we declare to the world around us that we are here because God has acted and has promised to be with us; and he does not break his promise. Even when there is need and suffering, he is there as the one who is hungry and in need himself, and the one who satisfies all our hunger and all our need. Second, earlier in the gospel, Jesus said that the Advocate 'is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him'. Someone once said: 'If you want to know how the Holy Spirit looks, then you have to look at the saints'. The spirit does not come in a visible form for people to see. He appears in the form of God's people. How does the spirit look like? He looks like YOU. He may even look like me! In us, the Holy Spirit has come alive, and it is that life that we must show to the world.

But we have to be careful, to show that life to the world is not about being busy joining the legions of believers claiming to have all the answers to the troubles of our world. Rather, it means simply following where Jesus is, which will still provide us with challenges, individual and collective. On Pentecost Sunday in 2001, I was ordained a priest in Nazareth to work for the Anglican diocese there. The ordination was first planned to take place in Jerusalem. However, after a suicide bombing taking place that weekend, many of those who were scheduled to travel to Jerusalem decided to cancel, not knowing how the political tensions would develop. To make it easier, the bishop decided to hold the ordination in Nazareth. It was a weekend full of tension, uncertainty, and fear. It was one occasion when those who visited from abroad to attend the ordination were conscious of the human complexity of so much they had seen and shared. In the face of all that violence, this was a moment when choices seemed more dramatically clear. It felt that there was a sense in which you had to answer certain questions about where you stood and with whom you belonged. As you may have been following on the news, the Holy Land continues to struggle with finding justice and sanity as the innocent continue to be killed.

A few days after the horrific killings of the schoolchildren in Texas, and we are still struggling to get our heads around such a nightmare. How do we sit here and sing our Easter and Ascension tide joyful hymns whilst we think of those lives that were cut short and of the unimaginable loss and trauma suffered? 'It's not guns that kill, it's people', a good deal of Americans seem to say. Well, maybe. But it does make a difference what kind of weapon is there for them to use and even more.... what happens to people in a climate where fear is everywhere, and the default response is more security as Donald Trump suggested this week. 'Bring more security to the schools' he argued. The problem is that we

end up living worried about defence all the time, we cease to enjoy living on the soil we are so keen to defend. The guns have used the people too. Instead, we, here, proclaim Christ crucified, the wisdom and the power of God, through whom all swords are beaten into ploughshares, as Isaiah said. In this post Easter, post Ascension tide, weapons and bombs are not left to hang around. They are knocked out of shape. Jesus is not simply being optimistic when he prays for his disciples; he does warn us of the dim reality that we all face, like he did with Peter, of the increasingly fragmented and unstable society in which we live; falling and stumbling is all part of the business of following Christ. But, if we don't have guns, but only the crucified Christ and his openness to love and be loved, then everything looks like a promise. We can stand on our feet and face the world around us with all its troubles because the Spirit is in us, because peace has already been given. All our work is rooted in his gift. Without that gift, we cease to be passionate about God or each other.

Let us pray that God may equip us, equip this Church community to go out on its journey with the vision of Christ crucified and glorified so that further generations in this place will have cause to thank God, not because we have all been successful in all that we do, but because we try and walk with Christ and breathe his Spirit.

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