

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

24 May 2020

READINGS

Acts 1.6-14

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, '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.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

John 17.1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘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.

‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

COLLECT

Risen, ascended Lord,
as we rejoice at your triumph,
fill your Church on earth with power and compassion,
that all who are estranged by sin
may find forgiveness and know your peace,
to the glory of God the Father.

SERMON

Rev Philip Cox

I'm not sure whether you've heard my dinner party conversation stopper, "Some years ago I spent the afternoon in a hotel bedroom in Hythe with two women and a video recorder." Before you rush to get me defrocked, I should explain I was on an appraisal course organised by Kent Education Committee. The three of us were head teachers being trained to manage the appraisal system in our schools which the government had ordained should be introduced. So there we were, taking it in turns to be appraiser, appraisee and observer. Nowadays assessment, quality control and goal setting are commonplace in the workplace. On the credit side, employees can benefit from knowing what they are doing well, reflecting on what can be improved and identifying resources and opportunities that will increase their effectiveness. On the debit side, the process can diminish self-worth by implying that the boss wants to squeeze as much out of you as he can without hope of promotion or pay rise and even an excuse for redundancy. The concept of appraisal has always been part of the Christian life, but we use terms like confession and examination of conscience. Alongside private prayer to our Lord we may also employ a soul friend, spiritual advisor or prayer partner to help us take stock and plan the next steps on our Christian journey.

This week we have remembered the end of Jesus' earthly life as we commemorated his Ascension. Today's Gospel reading, sometimes called the High Priestly Prayer, allows us to share his reflections on his earthly ministry and his attempt to assess it in terms of what God had given him to undertake – in modern terms, he engages in self-appraisal. He looks forward to going to God his Father, he looks back on his being in the world. How has it been: for himself, his disciples and in relation to his Father's will and plan?

He clearly feels he has used his authority to good effect, making God's name known first to his disciples and then to those who came to believe through his preaching, teaching and healing. However, he must soon have felt his self-worth under threat as a few hours later Judas betrays him, Peter denies him and the disciples later hide and his confidence is so low he asks his Father if the cup may pass from him. Nevertheless, he stands firm – "Thy will be done" – and experiences the ultimate joy of seeing revitalised and spirit-infused disciples anxious to continue the spread of the Gospel message. "A job well done" his Fatherly Boss, hopefully, will have told him as they are reunited after his Ascension.

What of us? It may be that Lent is the traditional time for reflection, but Ascension reminds us the disciples (that's us, these days) are now in the front line making decisions and needing to assess how his body, the church, is carrying on its inherited task, "to make disciples of all nations". Jesus' prayer does not emphasise accomplishments, actions or deeds however worthy and well-intentioned these may be. Rather, he focuses on relationships: with God the Father, with Jesus himself, between the disciples and with (post-Ascension) God's Spirit.

Today's Covid-19 crisis may, ironically, be of assistance in helping us to focus less on Christian business and more on Christian unity in prayer, reflection and mutual spiritual support. Yes, it is very right to offer transport, shopping and food banks to the increased number of vulnerable people at this time. Let us not, however, neglect constancy in prayer, expressions of Christian love and concern by email, phone or letter and, above all, by seeking the Father's will for us, his servants, in this challenging time

To go back to basics, what is the purpose of Christ's church in today's world? What are the tasks given to all we who confess His name? just as an appraisal session may send us back to the drawing board, so a covid-19 induced lockdown may lead us back to our Father for a re-examination of our rôles, individually and collectively as his disciples.

Amen

HYMN

May the mind of Christ, my Saviour,
live in me from day to day,
by his love and pow'r controlling
all I do and say.

May the Word of God dwell richly
in my heart from hour to hour,
so that all may see I triumph
only through his pow'r.

May the peace of God my Father
rule my life in ev'rything,
that I may be calm to comfort
sick and sorrowing.

May the love of Jesus fill me
as the waters fill the sea;
him exalting, self abasing:
this is victory.

May I run the race before me,
strong and brave to face the foe,
looking only unto Jesus
as I onward go.