

## Easter 7 – Sunday after Ascension Year C 2019

There is an air of expectation to be gleaned from our Collect today – the Seventh Sunday after Easter, and just days after the Feast of the Ascension – ‘We beseech you to leave us not comfortless, but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us.’

In the Gospel is that sense of the Lord’s seeking to draw the disciples to understand the very unity to which all Christians are called to as people of faith. Jesus emphasises this unity as Glory as he talks to his Father – ‘The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.’ This extraordinary call to understanding the unity of Christians to the divine is not one bound up within our own human conceits or constructs. Rather, it takes us to the indwelling of God within the created order – something I spoke about on Thursday evening when we celebrated the Ascension. To see the Ascension as merely concerning Jesus – some divine conjuring trick on God’s part is, I think, a mistake. Rather this Feast points to the fact that we are called through our own faith to remember that the Ascension of the Lord is also our own Ascension in the here and now – a strong reminder of God’s strong desire to constantly draw us closer and closer into the knowledge of the divine love. The Ascension represents our understanding of the Divine Presence within our own lives, and that the physical presence of Jesus is no longer important. We are united with the Christ in every moment of our lives. It is what we seek to make of that relationship that governs our spiritual lives together with the way we reveal and communicate the knowledge and gift of divine love to the world.

That said, I always think that this period between the Ascension and Pentecost (or Whitsun) next Sunday is, in liturgical terms a bit of an in-between time – a pause, a chance to reflect, to draw a breath as the Church prepares to celebrate the empowerment of the Apostles by the Holy Spirit - something which then flows into the life of the believer and thus into those who are touched by that person in an overflowing of grace.

Sometimes it’s a struggle to feel part of the Divine plan for humanity when things go wrong or pressures overwhelm us, and this is where we are helped by such passages as the one from Acts. It is a wonderful account of humanity transformed through faith, of obstacles overcome by knowledge of the Divine picture within our lives – of that sense that Christ’s Ascension to glory is also ours. I’m sure that I may have commented to you that Father Peter, one of the brethren of the Community of the Resurrection – and principal of the College of the Resurrection where I trained, was apt to say of the Acts of the Apostles that as a book it was just too smug for words. All those great deeds of God, miracles left right and centre, and yet recently even Father Peter changed his mind – in the face of increasing secularism and the apparent lack of people seeming to need faith within their lives, we are helped through Luke’s writing. It is more a call to look at the world continually through fresh eyes.

What Acts teaches us is the sense of this indwelling of glory in the believer – something which then overflows into the ordinary world. Consider this account today – Paul’s dealing with this young girl who has chased both he and Silas up hill and down dale, really annoying them, reduces Paul in anger to denounce the gift she seems to have, although you will in fact note that she has herself become a secondary proclaimer of the Gospel. The action

intensifies when Paul and Silas are denounced, stripped and beaten because the young girl is no longer a source of income to those who control her. The abused person is released from the bondage of coercion and herself finds true freedom through the inward working of the Holy Spirit within her life

The vivid account of the earthquake followed with the jailer's attempted suicide leads Paul to take the situation at the prison in hand. In proclaiming the Gospel the jailer is then converted. There is that tender moment when this transformed man washes Paul and Silas's wounds before he and his whole family are baptised. Proclamation/Conversion – something which takes place in our world every single day in the name of Jesus Christ. This account is so human, and yet shot through with the glory of faith – the transformational knowledge of God's indwelling within humanity made known through Jesus.

The readings we have heard this week then may be seen as preludes in preparing us to contemplate the coming of the Holy Spirit which the Church celebrates next Sunday. Paul and Silas's adventure gives us a sense of the real possibilities of God's power to surprise, even in desperate circumstances.

For the Apostles in the Gospel reading it is different; rather like dropping a penny and watching it roll, until after some inordinately long period of time it ceases going around and round in ever-decreasing circles and comes to rest. The disciples listening to the Lord's words THINK that they understand, but they won't fully until they have experienced Passion, Death, Resurrection, Ascension together with the acceptance of the inward work of the Holy Spirit within their own lives.

We have a head start on them, but, like Paul and Silas have to be prepared to count the cost of revealing the true love of Christ to the world in which we live – something, however, in which we are empowered to do through the abiding work of the Holy Spirit within. This is the strengthening the Collect speaks of – strengthening which does indeed 'exult us to the place where our Saviour Christ has gone before.' Although our final destination is absolutely at the heart of the God's Love, we are called to the realisation that God's glory fills the world here and now, and each of us pointers and signs to this glory and great love, made known through Jesus Christ.



Christians restoring the cross to their church in Iraq

### **Acts 16:16-34**

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

### **Revelation: 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-end**

'See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.'

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. 'It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.'

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'

And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.'

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

### **John 17: 20-end.**

'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'