

28 May 2017

Sunday After Ascension



Readings:

- Acts 1:5-14
- 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11
- John 17.1-11

On Wednesday night some of us were at the Ascension Church for a service of Holy Communion celebrating the Ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven, marking the final part of the Easter Season which finishes next week with our celebration of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles and founded the church. At the beginning of the Easter season, we were reminded of the story when Mary Magdalene met with the risen Jesus on Easter Morning. Mary is overjoyed and tries to hold on to him, perhaps wanting things to be just as they were before. But Jesus says to her "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." I am not yet ascended, not yet finished the work, I cannot stay like this. If I stay here I cannot finish the work of the Father and bring about forgiveness to all mankind. This Jesus achieves at Ascension when he rises to Heaven and enters the holy of holies in heaven and makes atonement in heaven with his blood. Now Jesus is crowned King of Heaven, and He is seated at the right hand of the father, and now available to everyone everywhere throughout all time. This was symbolised in our Ascension Day service with the extinguishing of the Easter Candle which represented Christ's presence on earth. We have celebrated his risen presence on earth, now we are asked to fix our eyes on things above, with Jesus at the right hand of God.

We want to see Jesus, and as our offertory hymn we will be singing the following

**Paschal Lamb, Thine offering, finished
Once for all when Thou wast slain,
In its fullness undiminished
Shall forever more remain,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Cleansing souls from every stain.**

You were offered up in heaven on Ascension Day as you were on Good Friday, and now forever you will be our offering. Now we can be given the Holy Spirit as the barrier of sin has been removed in heaven as on earth, symbolised by the temple curtain being torn in two, as we will celebrate next week at Pentecost

**Life-imparting, heavenly Manna,
Stricken Rock with streaming side,
Heaven and earth with loud hosanna
Worship Thee, the Lamb who died,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Risen, ascended, glorified!**

The glory of Christ; ascended, glorified, and we are in Him, and we have the eternal life of the Holy Spirit now. That is fantastic, and we thank God for it and glorify God each day for it. This is what Jesus predicted in his High priestly prayer which we had read to us as our gospel reading.

“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". (John 17:1-5)

Is that it; that is the normal Christian life? Not quite. But, and it is a big “but”, we still have to live in the world as it is, with all its problems and with the knowledge of our own and each other’s weaknesses. We have faith in the risen, ascended and glorified Jesus and that keeps us going, but how do we cope in the “here and now?” How do we cope when things go wrong, people we love get sick and die, when plans go wrong, when relationships break up in our families and friends, when jobs go wrong, when friends fall out, and of course, given the events of this week in Manchester, when evil and wicked people decide to wreak havoc in the lives of ordinary men women and children?

The first thing to recognise is that there is a battle in heaven going on as on earth; The book of Revelation shows us this. There will be times in our Christian lives that we personally are going to suffer, that we as a church are going to suffer, that we as a nation are going to suffer – that is the normal Christian life. It has its peaks, its plains, but also its ‘valleys of the shadow of death’ as the psalmist puts it. This may come as a result of our sins, sometimes it is just the way of life, and sometimes it is a direct assault on us by the devil, who wishes to destroy our walk with Jesus. Peter puts it like this:

“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 insofar 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.” (1 Peter 4:12-14)

Jesus, the most pure, kind, wonderful, person that ever walked this earth, was reviled, persecuted and eventually killed by his own people, because of the battle between good and evil that is going on. Therefore our suffering, when it seems we have done nothing wrong, should not surprise us, but we should rejoice because it is the confirmation that we belong to God and that we are suffering as He did and, that like Him, God is on our side and will

ultimately bring us through. As he was glorified, so shall we be, if we keep going, hang on, and rejoice at God's promises to be with us always.

Why did Manchester happen? Because evil men, influenced by an evil ideology, decided to do an evil act. Why did God not stop them? Because if he stopped everyone who was going to do an evil act, he would have to stop us when we are about to do evil, and we would have a world where it was impossible to do wrong because God would stop us, and we would then have no moral choices and be like robots. If God wants us to have choices and to make the right choices then we also have to have the possibility of making the wrong choices. Hopefully we learn from bad choices, but if we continue in evil choices, then the evil will start to take us over and we come more and more evil, as I believe the bombers have become. How do we act in the light of this, when the evil people want to attack our very way of life? My own view is that we must decide that our way of life is worth preserving and that we will not let evil people stop us doing what we consider to be right. That is why I am glad we are back in the rough and tumble of a General Election campaign, we must not let evil people affect our democratic way of life. There is always the risk of evil coming to the surface at times and affecting us, yes, but this is the risk we must take if we are to remain morally responsible adults, who want a moral society. There will be fiery ordeals therefore, and we must go through them, grieving with those who grieve, taking part in civic society, doing what we can to care. But never should we doubt God in the middle of it. As he brought Jesus through the trial of the cross to the glory of Ascension, so He will also be with us, though for a time we may have to suffer.

Remember, the first words of our reading from 1 Peter – beloved. You are loved by God, and he brought you into being in love and has redeemed you in love.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

So when things are tough, or even a bit dry, when we seem to be going through the motions, and wonder if God is really with us, what should we do now, today? It is a matter of the will to say that we will keep going in the faith.

What should we then do?

- **Humble v6 "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time."** Strange as it may seem, you and I are not God. You have not got the insight of God on this matter – you are on earth, God is in heaven. So do not judge God, complain about Him to others, take your complaint to God direct as the Psalmists often do. Why God, they cry, and so should we cry to God not to others. Humble yourself; put yourself in His hands and cry out to Him in your pain, worry, bewilderment. He will hear you, but the circumstances may not change immediately, but He has heard you and He will exalt you in due time, in His way and in His time.

- **Cast anxiety v7 Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.**
Do not worry about what is happening in your life, worry kills faith. Be concerned, but never worry. Let him deal with the situation. Let him hold it His mighty hands- illustration of a football. The problem is there, it is real, but if you keep looking at it, the problem becomes all-consuming and you will not see it properly. Prayer puts things in perspective.
- **Discipline yourselves & resist temptation & the devil**
v8 Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. v9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

We pray in the Lord's prayer, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. We must use sanctified common sense, avoid issues and situations where we are tempted to go astray. Drinker must avoid pubs, overeater must avoid sweetshops etc. If you know you get angry over politics, then avoid watching debates, if you are tempted to be over critical, then practice praise and compliments, tempted to be depressed, practice faith and do things you have not done before, but we must live in the world. Know that you are in a battle with the enemy, so resist him, by turning to the light. Be steadfast in the faith, say: 'no I will follow God. I will trust Jesus'. You are not alone, this is the normal Christian life.

- **Have hope**
v10 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. v11 To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Whatever is going on in your life or in the world trust that God is in control and that the circumstances will not crush you, that you will emerge stronger. All things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called to His purposes. You may see things improve, you may not see it in the way you want, but trust that God is at work,

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain. (1 Cor 15:58)

Beloved, that is the most important message that we need to hear. At Colchester Zoo there is an ant colony, where there is frenzied activity for the cause. We are not like worker ants, sent out to flog ourselves to death in the face of adversity, and if we die to be carried off and replaced by others. No, every hair on our head is numbered by a loving and gracious God, who knows what is going on. Trust Him, the situation you are going through is known to Him, trust that He will see you through it. Have faith and have hope. Jesus is in heaven reigning, but for a while at least, for reasons we do not fully understand, sometimes things appear to be going wrong, with evil taking place and perhaps illness and death or serious problems occurring. It does not mean God is not in control, or that he does not love you. It is that this is a circumstance he has chosen not to intervene directly in, and you and I must find a way of faith through it.

1Corinthians 10 v13 says “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

We are here to glorify God, by our lives, words and choices. It is not going to be easy – there will be the pulls of the world, the flesh and the devil. Jesus is with us, alongside us, on our side. He wants us to get on with the job, knowing He is with us. Next week we will be celebrating Pentecost, where we will look at the power given for service, the Holy Spirit; but for now, we must watch and wait, and keep going in faith, knowing that as a famous sermon on Good Friday which listed all the horrors of the crucifixion, but then added to each description, It's Friday Lord, but Sunday's comin.

O Lord God, when you give to your servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but continuing of the same to the end, until it be thoroughly finished which yieldeth the true glory. (Attributed to Sir Francis Drake)