

## ST ALBAN'S EPPING

SUNDAY 26TH MAY 2019; SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Also Harvest Festival, Sunday before Ascension Day and Centenary of founding of BCA.

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:1-8, 22-25; John 14:23-29

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Amen.

Today could be an exceptionally busy Sunday – and I am not referring to the inaugural journeys of the metro through Epping!

It is, as we can see from the lovely display of fresh and processed foods and symbols of the way we city people earn our living, Harvest Festival, when we especially thank God for the gifts of harvest, food and meaningful work, and we share some of this bounty through Christian Community Aid, with those in need. Today would once have been called the fifth Sunday after Easter, but is now called the sixth Sunday in Easter, when we draw our celebration of the Easter season to a conclusion. This means we look now to the end of this week, when we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus – his physical taking leave of his friends and followers to return to his Father in heaven. But lest this should leave us downcast, we note too that we almost have our celebration of Pentecost upon us, when we are mindful that Jesus did not leave his friends bereft, but came to them in the person of the Holy Spirit. So this Sunday is rich with meaning for us, but there is one more thing we need to note and celebrate. It is 100 years today since the Bush Church Aid Society was founded. This parish has long supported the society with regular financial support, prayerful interest, active involvement on its committees and the legacy of Jan and Max Boyley, who founded the Grey Nomads who with some discretionary time in retirement, visit outposts of BCA and stay for a period to work and support staff there.

So where to for us today?

As usual, I would like to try for us to grasp what the meaning was of our Scripture readings for those who originally heard them and then to wrestle with what they mean for us in our day, how we might live their teachings out. Let me start then with the Gospel reading. Jesus' followers are given instructions as to how they are to show in their lives the same love Jesus did, when he lived among them, showing to all the nature of God. They, and we too, are promised the peace of Jesus. That peace is "not as the world gives" which is dependent on circumstances, but is a peace that derives from being grounded in the presence of God. Jesus tells his friends that he will come to them and make his home with them. In saying this, he uses the same word for room or home as he used in the familiar comforting words found in the beginning of chapter 14 of John's gospel: "In my father's house are many rooms.". So it is a peace that comes from the indwelling presence of God. What are we really wishing each other in the liturgical exchange of the peace? "The peace of the Lord be with you" is rooted in our biblical tradition where it is the greeting of the risen Christ and reflects Jesus' later words: "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you.". In finding wholeness and forgiveness in the love of God, we are able to be at peace with others and offer that peace to them.

The part of the Gospel of John in which our reading today is located, is generally known as the farewell discourse, from chapter 13 to chapter 17. Like much of John's Gospel, these chapters don't always proceed in a linear fashion, but touch on themes and then spiral around to take them up again and develop them further. These chapters show Jesus giving a calm farewell and final commands before his passion. Before the events, they already interpret the passion and death of Jesus and their purpose in God's plan, as well as foreshadowing that Jesus would return to the

Father. Their further purpose is to give a view of the way the Christian life was to be lived after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus tells his disciples that he is going away from them, but adds that he will return. Effectively, the disciples are told they are living in an in-between time, but it would not have been clear to them just what this meant. So this section of John's gospel gives instructions to Jesus' followers for the in-between time, a time in which we too live. The foot washing early in the section is seen by some as a dramatic presentation of the love command which is found in these chapters. The actual command is for Jesus' followers to love one another. Also mentioned is God's love for his son. And Jesus, we are told, loves his disciples. The disciples are called on to love Jesus and if they do, the Father will love them – a trinity of love. The command for the followers of Jesus to love each other is both an instruction to us, but also a sign to others that these people who live out this love, are the disciples of Jesus. There seems to be a strong connection between the love of the disciples for each other, the love which the father has for Jesus and the love which Jesus has for us. So the love we are commanded to have for our fellow Christians is much more than a sentimental feeling, and one scholar warns that the simplicity of the words should not disguise the radical and open-ended nature of the commandment.

The writing in the final discourse in John's Gospel is a genre, a **type** of writing in the ancient world, where the parting advice of a revered figure is given, a type called a "testament". It not only offers advice to the following generation but to all following generations. This is what John has Jesus doing in the verses we read today. Some 2,000 years later, we are assured that Jesus will show himself to those who keep his commandments, who love him and are loved by the father. Jesus will come to us and in this in-between time, will make his dwelling in us. Those words where Jesus says that there are many dwelling places in his Father's house are quite familiar to us, especially from the funeral service. But note that in that image later in the chapter, there is a new twist to it: we are to be the dwelling places of God and Jesus. One commentator says that while loving Jesus and keeping his word may be variously defined, at a fundamental level, it must mean our being an embodiment of God's offer of love, just as Jesus was. John's emphasis is not so much on what lies beyond death, but the promise of a sense of the presence of God.

In the snippet of a story we have in Acts today, in place of an Old Testament reading, it is clear that the followers of Jesus who went out two by two to preach the good news, expected to be put up by local hosts. This hospitality that became woven into the expectations of the Christian communities, is surely an expression and extension of the love of Jesus' followers for other followers. Lydia seems to have been a successful businesswoman in the city of Thyatira, with some sort of leadership role in her congregation. She was a worshipper and sought baptism into the faith. Then she prevailed upon Luke and whoever was accompanying him to stay at her home. Interestingly, she prefaced her urging with "if you have found me to be faithful,". Later, we learn that she remained faithful and offered continuing support to Paul when he was released from gaol and throughout his later ministry. I think it is a neat way the collators of our lectionary offer us a nice little cameo example of the faithful, deep and sustained love of Jesus' friends for each other.

And now to the Book of Revelation. It is a revelation that a writer from a different culture, language and era is trying to convey to us. It is necessarily full of imagery, symbols, poetic language and the unfolding of a man's God-given vision conveying the themes in his own way. We need, under God, and consistent with the rest of the Scriptures, to use an informed and attuned imagination to enter into the experience of a past generation and to bring it to life so that it becomes meaningful for our own time. The book reaches its climax with a vision of hope that represents a reworking of Israel's hopes. In a sense, as one scholar puts it, the clouds of glory have hung low over the camp of the

true Israel in their wilderness wanderings and now, John surveys the **eternal** promised land. Now God's dwelling is with people and the text uses the same word used regularly in the early Old Testament for a tent, the symbol of God's abiding presence in the midst of Israel in the wilderness. John has used the term that implies that the promise of God's presence has already had constant fulfilments in the past wherever Israel has been true to her calling - very much akin to what Jesus said in John 14 of those who love him and do his will. The final establishment of God's presence has been anticipated in many ways, but above all, in the incarnation. "They shall be his people" is how the outworking of the covenant at Sinai was described. The assurance to Moses at the burning bush was "God himself will be with them.". The concept of God being with humankind was enshrined in the prophetic name "Immanuel", "God with us", ratified as it were, by Jesus in Matthew 1:23 in confirming the title as his own.

God says "I am making all things new." This process of re-creation evolves as the old is transformed into the new. Paul had spoken of a new creation in the lives of people, whereby when anyone is in Christ, there is being built up daily an inner person into Jesus' likeness, hidden with God in Christ until the day of his appearing. So John tells us that the heavenly city has come down from heaven - the new Jerusalem. To speak of God's glory is to speak of God's being in all its brilliance and richness, and so there is no need in the new Jerusalem for buildings, and God's presence is the light.

There is no need for a sanctuary any more as God's very self is present. The focus is on the immediacy of God, on the person of God. What more could be needed? John is told "write this", because the voice from the ultimate future has something urgent to say to the present: "I am making all things new." John assuredly does not want us to think that in eternity, the earth will continue to be the dwelling place of people, and heaven the dwelling place of God. The point of the descent is that now, God's dwelling place will be with people. This is a future that interpenetrates and informs the present. With the eyes of faith, we look forward to that day. In Genesis 8:22 it says "as long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." Our Revelation reading confirms we are in the in-between time and this scenario is going to vanish, when the final making new of all things occurs. The earth will not endure; it will be made new. Night will cease as God himself will be the light."

So how do we pull all this together?

We are thankful for harvest, for meaningful work, for Christian community and the love of God underpinning all. But how do we respond to the vision of the culmination of time? Some are so swept away by this vision, that they adopt a triumphalist tenor to their expression of it. When we think of how badly we as the church sometimes represent God, as we seek to share the Good News with others and invite them to be part of us, this is quite an inappropriate stance for us to take – indeed an offensive hypocrisy to many people.

We know that John's writing in Revelation contained messages to seven churches, messages to help them prepare in the in-between time for the end time, and to help them understand that the end time will be severe because the churches are meant to be holy, and to be Christ's representatives here on earth. The message to the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia were commendations. There were some commendations and some rebukes to Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira and no commendation to Sardis, accused of being dead or to Laodicea, rebuked for being lukewarm in the faith. If John had included a message to the Church in Epping or more broadly, to the church in this city, what would it have said to us as we seek to be a holy people and to be Christ's representatives here in Sydney? We need to remember again the words of John 14: "Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them."

Given the recent history of the church at large where there has been child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse, turning our faces away from the poor and dispossessed, has the community at large seen a community of faith characterised by love?. Sadly, only rarely so. We as church have often shown ourselves not to be trustworthy by using and abusing, instead of loving the vulnerable and needy. Given the gracious love of God that we want to share in all its fullness, we need to humbly seek forgiveness for those past wrongs and ask that our lives will be so shaped by Christ, that they will serve as a sign of his love to all, and we may be the instruments through which God builds community trust in his church again. Perhaps then we will be able to fully rejoice as we prepare to move out of the in-between time into the end time.

In the name of God who makes his home with us, of the Son who loves us and teaches us to love each other and of the Spirit who indwells us until God's Kingdom comes. Amen.