

Sunday after the Ascension (Seventh Sunday of Easter), 10 May 2020

“LIVING IN THE IN-BETWEEN”

(Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 5; John 17:1-11)

According to the traditional Book of Common Prayer and the Australian Prayer Book which Anglicans used from 1978, today is the “Sunday after Ascension Day”. But something changed with the Prayer Book of Australia, which has been used by Anglicans since 1995. In this prayer book, and in the Australian Lectionary, today is now simply called the Seventh Sunday of Easter.

I don’t know the reason for this change. But I have to say that I don’t agree with it! Of course Ascension Day is celebrated on a Thursday, forty days after Easter, never on a Sunday. But Christ’s ascension is a very significant event, and it has always been helpful to link **this** Sunday with the event. In fact, today’s first reading includes Luke’s account of the Ascension from the Book of Acts. So you may not be surprised that I got Denise to put the traditional name of this Sunday in our bulletin.

In fact, I am not convinced that this Sunday really belongs to the Easter season. Easter focuses on the reality that **Christ has risen**. And in fact we celebrate that truth **every** Sunday. But from last Thursday we celebrated a new truth, and really a new era. For those forty days from Easter Day, Jesus had been seen a number of times by the disciples. He reassured them and encouraged them and taught them and spent time with them. But the Ascension was the conclusion of his physical bodily life on earth. The disciples would see him no more. A new era was beginning: as Jesus had warned them, they would need to live without his visible presence.

But that didn’t mean that Jesus was no longer with them. He would be with them in the person of the Holy Spirit, who would come in a new way on the day of Pentecost, just ten days after the Ascension. Christ had ascended, but at that time the Spirit had not yet been poured out on the disciples. In a sense, these ten days from the Ascension are an in-between period – a period of waiting and preparation. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ has ascended. But what next? That was the question for those first disciples. No wonder they stood gazing into heaven as Jesus ascended in the cloud beyond the bounds of earth.

The disciples had been expecting the risen Jesus to establish his kingdom in Jerusalem. When would this happen? But Jesus told them to forget such events. They didn’t need a timetable in order to fulfil God’s purposes for them. That would be a distraction. And they still needed to realize that Christ’s kingdom was not a political kingdom at all, and it would not be established by political or military means. Their challenge was in fact to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus, the Gospel of **grace**, which would be preached not only in Jerusalem, not even just in Judea and places nearby. The Gospel would go out to Samaria and to places further away, to many people they wouldn’t have expected. In fact, the Gospel would go to the ends of the earth. The message of Christ was a message for all people everywhere. And **they** would be the messengers.

I wonder whether you have ever noticed that Jesus isn’t issuing orders here. He doesn’t say “You **must** be my witnesses here and everywhere.” He says “You **will** be my witnesses”. Of course the whole idea is daunting to them, to say the least. But Jesus is assuring the disciples that this extraordinary, unimaginable idea of his message going to all people everywhere, will actually become a reality. And he then tells them that they will receive power to enable them to play their part in this worldwide mission, through the coming of the Holy Spirit, which would take place very soon.

I can quite understand why they stood there staring into heaven, but then angelic messengers told them that waiting there like that was pointless. One day Jesus would indeed return visibly, in glory. But right now they were to get on with what they needed to be doing.

And in this waiting period, this “in-between period”, what did they do? They devoted themselves to prayer. They might be worried and even mystified by Jesus’ departure. They might be daunted by that extraordinary mission in front of them. They might feel ill-equipped for what lay ahead. But they could **pray**, opening up to the Lord, to his love and his power and his strength and his blessing. And that’s a very positive thing to do in an “in-between period”.

This period between Ascension Day and Pentecost reminds us that Christ now reigns in glory. He is our Advocate, interceding for us at his Father’s side.

And as we know, he is not with us visibly, but he **is** with us through the Holy Spirit, whose coming in power we celebrate at Pentecost, next Sunday. And the risen and ascended Christ will come again in glory, to put things right, both as judge, and as he ushers in the new Creation. Which reminds us that **we also** live in an “in-between” period.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ has ascended. Christ has sent his Spirit. All these things have happened for us, and they are wonderful realities. But Christ has not yet come again in glory. Hence that challenge of taking the Gospel to all people continues on. Hence the world is still far from what it should be, but also far from what it **will** be. And hence following Christ is not always easy.

How are **we** to live as Christ’s followers in this “in-between” period? Peter in our reading from his First Letter acknowledges the challenges we face. He describes our adversary the devil as prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. We are all spiritually vulnerable. No doubt we all know of people whose Christian faith has seemed strong, but then they have abandoned it, or they have said or done things which seem totally contrary to the faith they have professed. Yes, we are all vulnerable.

So Peter calls us to discipline ourselves, to keep alert, so that we are ready to handle the temptations which come to us in this world. For Peter’s readers, the temptations were often bound up with pressure to fit in with the way of life of those round about, mostly pagans: the pressure to fit in, to go with the flow, to avoid standing out. That pressure continues for us today.

But in those days, there was not only misunderstanding and mockery to contend with: there was active persecution as well, especially when the Roman Empire demanded that all people acknowledge Caesar as Lord. To refuse to do that could open you up to punishment, and even put your life at risk. Being a faithful Christian was not easy.

Peter tells his readers to remain faithful, and to be prepared to suffer, if that should be required. Christ suffered for us, as Peter can personally bear witness, and his followers need to be prepared to take up their cross as they follow him. And if that worries us, he says, “Cast all your anxiety on God, because he cares for you.” Just as those first Christians devoted themselves to prayer, Peter encourages us to be prayerful in all the challenges and struggles of life.

So how are we to live in this “in-between” period? Faithful witness, disciplined living, prayerful dependence on God: these are vital parts of the Christian life.

And of course, Jesus himself **was** a man of prayer. The whole of John 17, of which we heard the opening verses as our Gospel, is a prayer: a prayer for the fulfilment of God’s purposes as Jesus faces the cross, and a prayer for his followers, both those gathered around him at the Last Supper, and those who would become his followers over the years and centuries that lay ahead. Jesus prays, knowing that he is about to complete the work his Father has sent him to do: on the cross he will cry out “It is finished”, as his death brings forgiveness and salvation to all his people.

But his people, those who open up to his gift of eternal life, still live in **this** world with all its pressures and temptations and problems. Jesus prays that God will protect them in his name: when we pray for God’s help in our struggles, we can remember that Christ prays for us too.

But Jesus has another prayer for his people that is especially relevant at this time of the year. He prays that his followers may be **one**, as he and the Father are one. He prays for the unity of his church, and Christians in many places acknowledge this week as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The unity of the church is Christ’s **gift**: all Christ’s people **are** one family in him. But we do not always express that gift or live it out: hence we must continue to **pray** for a deepening expression of that unity – unity within our own congregation, including this time when we cannot meet regularly, as well as unity in the wider church with its divisions, which certainly do not help the spread of the Gospel. Humility, of which Peter wrote, and love, are vital if we are to live in unity as members of Christ’s family.

Today reminds us of the disciples waiting in their “in-between” period. But we too live in the “in-between”. We thankfully **remember** all that has been done for us by Christ. We **look forward** to that great day when we shall see him in glory, But right now, we are called to prayer, faithful discipleship, humble witness, and love: love for one another as members of Christ’s beloved family, love for all Christians, and indeed love for all people.

Our Christian hope is not just a theoretical idea, a “mere doctrine”: it is expressed in how we live and speak and relate as Christ’s followers. Let us then faithfully live as true followers of the risen, ascended, living and returning Christ. Amen.

Paul Weaver