

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 16, 2021

Today is the Last Sunday of Easter. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Pentecost, often celebrated as the birthday of the church. I'd like to suggest we celebrate that birthday together.

Next Sunday (weather permitting), we will have church on the front steps! Bring a chair, we will have some available, but that way you have a seat! We will still need to socially distance a bit, the same restrictions we had before still apply – but don't worry about your mask. If the weather does not cooperate, I will still be there and I invite you to come sit in the church with me. No formal service, we can meditate together, I will lead a prayer (or two). Inside we will still need our masks if we go this route - and then we will see where we can go from there!

This is perhaps a somewhat odd way to “do” church, but these are odd times and we will celebrate the birthday of the church together! Look for a more formal invitation on this early next week.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Praying together:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

Let us now pray the collect of the day.

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

First Lesson
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus-- for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry. So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us-- one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you

know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

The Response

Psalm 1

Beatus vir qui non abiit

1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

2 Their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and they meditate on his law day and night.

3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;
everything they do shall prosper.

4 It is not so with the wicked;
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.

5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes,
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.

6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

The Epistle

1 John 5:9-13

If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

The Gospel

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to John.
Glory to you Lord Christ.

John 17:6-19

Jesus prayed for his disciples, “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. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

Praise to you Lord Christ.

A Reflection

May the words written and the prayers of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Words are something that has always been a favorite plaything for me. On a lighter side, as anyone who is friends with me on Facebook will attest to, puns are something that often makes their presence known. On a more serious note, passages like today’s Gospel intrigue me, because we need to tease the meaning out of them. It’s quite a web of words and thoughts! And we are often going too fast to catch the meaning behind the words.

It’s a little like traveling on the highway. At high speeds, which we are all asked to live at, (far too often, in my mind!) we only catch the big and obvious sights – or, if we don’t think we have time to listen, it is just clear and obvious that we catch. But at high speed, we often miss something that would have done us good to see, if we would but take the time to slow down and take notice. If we slow down and pay attention, we may catch something we didn’t expect. We will need to slow down to clearly catch today’s words!

Or as we hear it today’s Psalm, “They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper.” Trees do not hurry in their work, streams sometimes work faster – but they both work not slowly, but according to the time dictated by God and nature. “And everything they do shall prosper.” Maybe there is a lesson in this for us.

To connect with the words being offered in this Gospel, we need to put them in the context of seeing this as Jesus praying for his disciple, and more, too. He is if you look and listen carefully,

praying for all of us. In his prayer, he offers “I am asking on their behalf” (the disciples), “I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me.” But he then goes on to say, “because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.” The disciples and the world are all his, as they are God’s also, so this shows a oneness in it all for us and all disciples. He closes this prayer by offering “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

But the theme of oneness seems to continue. “While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.” A powerful farewell.

Jesus has given us the glory and the challenge that God has given him. When Jesus offers, “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” His word is not separate from us – but in receiving it, we are separate from the world. That word is now part of who we are.

And then, the challenge is offered as he prays, “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

It is more than just this suggested universal oneness, though. “And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.” This is oneness wrapped up in truth!

With all this wonderful poetic imagery, I want to step back for a moment and offer some thoughts regarding context. Keep in mind, as we explore the Gospel selections out of John that John was written, according to biblical scholars, potentially 90 to 150 years after the crucifixion. This is not the news report. This is not on the spot eye witness to the events in question. This was a text written a number of years after what would have been a traumatic event for a community. A spiritual community just getting its start as this trauma unfolded.

Does this invalidate these words? Not at all! These words were written for a community of followers of this new spiritual community, at a time where the world offered much in the way of “competition” for this community. People had doubts, just like we do today. People struggle with the competing images to worship, just like we do today.

If this prayer offered by Jesus offers some peace of mind or clarity in the midst of the competitive forces the world offers, it has done its job and done it well. Oneness with God and Jesus wrapped up in love could certainly make me feel better in the struggles the world offers. Perhaps, especially now.

Even in the context of this prayer, Jesus is expressing doubt, or perhaps a dilemma. As described in some of the commentary I read – to quote, “Will later generations of Christians, who were not part of the circle who first encountered Jesus, be able to experience with the same kind of unity with God and Christ as those though whom they came to faith?” We hear this is the prayer when Jesus offers the prayer “for the words that you gave to me I have given to them.”

Still have any doubt? Jesus then offers “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.” He not only desires that we are with him to see his glory, he desires that we share the oneness that he shares with God which can be made manifest in so many ways, (manifest perhaps in sunrise or sunset of blooming spring flowers or when we feel love – where do you see it manifest?), but it also suggests this arrangement goes back before anyone of us knew it was being arranged. If we have been given to him, we are now left with the awareness that something is bigger than we are. (A hard point to take in for many in the world today!)

Later in John Jesus offers the desire for us “to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” Again, acknowledging something bigger than we are. This love we are part of has been around since before the foundation of the world.

A bit of context here - in the Gospel of John, this is thought of as a final prayer, as it is shortly the final leg of the journey to the Cross begins. Did Jesus know what was coming? I believe he did. Did he know what the full journey would be? I also believe he knew this part, too. Perhaps not exactly how it would look, but he knew his destination.

We celebrated in the church calendar Ascension Day this past Thursday. This is the day we celebrate the Christian belief of the bodily Ascension of Jesus into heaven. The Latin terms used for the feast, *ascensio* and, occasionally, *ascensa*, signify that Christ was raised up by his own powers, and it is from these terms that the holy day gets its name.

The Gospel offers these words from Luke for Ascension Day. “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

Is it all a mystery? Brother James Koester from the Society of St John the Evangelist offers, “It’s impossible to speak of the glory that is ours at this very moment unless we first become poets. The language of the Ascension, indeed the language of Scripture, is the language of poetry. The language of Scripture is not the language of fact, but of mystery, myth, and metaphor. God is beyond all words.”

Slow down. Pay attention. Celebrate and embrace the mystery

Amen.

Let us end by praying as our Lord Jesus Christ taught us. Pray this as you will, out loud or to yourself – just know that God hears you.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.*

The prayer of Spiritual Communion this week is from apartheid era South Africa. In that time many prisoners were denied the sacraments and had to find other ways of taking Communion. This found its way into the 1989 Anglican Church of Southern Africa Prayer Book as a help to others who could not receive.

Jesus, may all that is you flow into me. May your body and blood be my food and drink. May your passion and death be my strength and life. Jesus, with you by my side enough has been given. May the shelter I seek be the shadow of your cross. Let me not run from the love which you offer but hold me safe from the forces of evil. On each of my dyings shed your light and your love. Keep calling to me until that day comes when, with your saints, I may praise you forever. Amen.

A Blessing for Easter

*The world is now too dangerous
And too beautiful for anything but love
May your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone
Your ears, so you hear the cry of the poor.
May your hand be so blessed
That everything you touch is a sacrament.
Your lips, so you speak nothing but the truth with love.
May your feet be so blessed you run
To those who need you.
And may your heart be so opened,
So set on fire, that your love,
Your love changes everything.
Amen.*

I look forward to seeing you next Sunday!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Yours in Christ,
Dave+

DPrentice@TrinityofWoburn.com