

Seventh Sunday of Easter

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 16 May 2021

Readings: Acts 1 vv 15-17 and 21-end; John 17 verses 6-19

There is a strange feeling of being in limbo today. On Thursday we celebrated Jesus' ascension, his freedom from the limitations of life on earth and his return to the life of heaven from which he came. Next Sunday is Pentecost, when we celebrate the equipping of the Church for the mission to which Jesus has commissioned us. Today, we wait, and reflect as we gear ourselves for mission. We are very much with the disciples who, as St Luke reminds us, were waiting in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit to empower them for their task.

This is not, of course, the actual setting for today's Gospel reading. In that reading, we go back in time, and listen to Jesus praying for his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. This reminds us, of course, that the different seasons and emphases of the Church's year are not compartmentalised, but reflections of different aspects of the same truth.

'As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.' These words in Jesus' prayer in the upper room at the Last Supper are, at one level, terrifying! We may try to shuffle out of the challenge, by arguing that they apply only to the first disciples. But that won't work. St John certainly believed that Jesus was giving a kind of charter for the whole church in this prayer. But we are left with those natural feelings of inadequacy. How can we possibly carry on Jesus' mission to the world?

There seem to be two major reasons for doubt over our ability to do what Jesus expects and, indeed, commands.

Firstly, how can we understand Jesus well enough to be able to represent him rightly? How can we present the whole gospel and not just our inadequate and partial interpretation of it?

Secondly, how can we cope with the opposition and ridicule we might, or fear we might, experience? Can we face the cost of discipleship?

The readings help us to face and come to terms with these natural anxieties.

Jesus reminds us that he has given us the words that we must take to the world: 'I gave them the words you gave me'. We must be well instructed in the basics of our faith if we are going to talk about it intelligently. We are challenged to be confident disciples. This is a serious question: how can Juliette and I best assist you in this?

What do we need to know?

In a nutshell, the story of Jesus, his sharing and bearing of our sin. It's interesting that, when the disciples came to replace Judas, they decided that the essential qualification for his successor was that he should have been present throughout the story, 'beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us'.

The focus then and now is on the story of Jesus' life through the key events of Jesus' ministry, starting with Jesus' baptism, at which the Spirit descended on him as he rose from the water of baptism, and his death, the shedding of his blood for us and on our behalf, and all that lies between, which we find in the gospels. The Holy Spirit came to empower Jesus for the life of ministry that lay between these two events of baptism and crucifixion - three short years that transformed the world for ever. In both his baptism

and his death, Jesus identified himself with us whom he came to save in all the inadequacy we feel.

It is clear from this that every disciple, us included, must know the story. That's the qualification for discipleship in every age. This story becomes part of us, in our hearts, because we who are baptized are invited to receive the Holy Spirit, and to know the reality of forgiveness of sins and to experience eternal life in Christ.

So the answer to the first question I posed is that we can only understand Jesus when we soak ourselves in his story, when we begin to wrestle with it and make it our own.

But the second question touches that raw nerve of fear. Can we cope with others' reaction when we start to tell the story of God's love for humanity in Jesus?

Jesus certainly makes it sound tough and doesn't try to hide the demands from us. But he prays for the protection of the disciples. In the end, we can only step out in faith, not quite knowing where that journey will lead us. We may surprise ourselves with the confidence that God gives us, as well as surprising others by what we say and do. But even if things are difficult and, perhaps, unbearable, we know that through the cross comes resurrection, for all who walk in the steps of Jesus.

But there is one ingredient missing in all that I have said - and that is the focus of our celebration next week. Without the Holy Spirit, anything we seek to do is futile and doomed to failure. So, come, Holy Spirit!