



Sixth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



22 May 2022

READINGS

Acts 16: 9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21: 10,22 - 22:5; John 14: 23-29

A home with the Father and the Son

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

If we try to imagine where the disciples must have been, mentally and emotionally, five weeks or so after the resurrection, I imagine perhaps they were still trying to make sense of what had transpired and to fully orient themselves. The Gospel reading we heard is from what is referred to as the Farewell discourse in John. In terms of John's sequence of events it occurs at the Last Supper, shortly before Jesus' arrest and trial.

In it, Jesus is, in part, trying to allay the fears of the disciples, to calm the anxiety occasioned by the prospect of his imminent departure. The content of the passage is therefore well-suited not only to a context preceding the Passion, where Jesus left his disciples through his death, but also – and this is why it was read today – in the lead up to the Ascension where, once more, Jesus will depart from his disciples, this time as he ascends to heaven. Thus, perhaps the disciples are once more saddened or worried by the prospect of Jesus' departure. Jesus calms the disciples by saying, "Peace I give to you; my peace I leave with you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Therefore, do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

In the midst of Jesus' recent resurrection, his impending departure to heaven, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, which perhaps the disciples were expecting, there might have been a great deal of excitement, anticipation, perhaps also worry and confusion as to what their future would be like, what the future of their ministry would look like. So let us spend a bit of time reflecting on some of these things. One of the main theological challenges which faced the Early Church was the problem of the delayed Parousia. Parousia is a Greek word used to refer to the arrival of a king or dignitary at a city. It was an occasion filled with much joy and celebration and it is used in the New Testament to refer to Christ's return.

Though, liturgically, we have not yet commemorated Christ's Ascension, perhaps we can be helped in exploring what the disciples must have felt or believed regarding Christ's presence (physical or spiritual) as well as what was thought to be his imminent return. The first generation of disciples, including Paul, believed that the return of Jesus was imminent and would happen in their lifetime, which presented a problem when members of that first generation began to pass away.

If one pauses to think on this, it is not difficult to see how such a belief would have shaped the ethic and ethos of that first generation. Without wishing to draw a direct comparison, the sense of urgency within that first generation was possibly not unlike that experienced or felt amongst many modern-day cults who anticipate the end of the world. And again, this is perhaps reflected in some of the injunctions given by Paul to his congregations. Consider 1 Corinthians 7 in which Paul tries to dissuade his addressees from marriage, for example 1 Corinthians 7:29 “This is what I mean, brothers and sisters: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none.”

It goes without saying that if one firmly and fervently believes in an imminent end-time, one’s priorities are likely to be rearranged. If we place ourselves in the shoes of the disciples some five weeks or so after Easter what might be at the forefront of our own minds? By now, we should be aware of the reality of the resurrection, and perhaps still working out its import, for our own lives and for the Church. We might have a sense of anticipation, an idea that something significant was about to happen. As we continue to reflect on the resurrection of Christ, and perhaps our own experiences of resurrection, and as we also anticipate the arrival of God’s Holy Spirit, how might we view the continuing ministry of God’s Spirit and of the Church which God’s Spirit empowers?

I ask these questions because although that first generation of believers may have suffered the disillusionment of the delayed Parousia, belief in Christ’s second coming remains central to the Christian faith. As an Anglican, and depending on what Creed is used, you will typically affirm this belief twice every Sunday – in the Nicene Creed and in the memorial acclamation of the Eucharistic prayer.

There is a close relationship between vision and belief. Sometimes we need to visualise something in order to believe in it or assent to it. The closing chapters of the book of Revelation, from which our second lesson was read today, details a vision of the close of the age – the new heaven, the new earth, where the dwelling place of God is among people. Likewise, our Gospel reading speaks to a changed reality where the Father and the Son have made their home with us; where the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, will teach us everything. When or at what point will this come about, and is this still a hope which the Church holds?