

Seventh Sunday of Easter May 24th

Readings: Acts 1.6-14; St John 17.1-11

‘They asked him, “Lord, has the time come for you to restore Israel?”.

For so long the disciples seemed to be floundering in the dark and only half understanding what Jesus was telling them but here, as they are gathered together after the resurrection, they form a pointed question. After all, the signs were right for the arrival of the Kingdom of God: their Saviour’s teaching had been vindicated, he was the Messiah and this was proved by his resurrection despite the apparent defeat of Calvary. Furthermore he instructed them to stay in Jerusalem until the baptism of the Spirit came upon them. Our reading from Acts fills out the episode Luke has already given at the end of his Gospel (24.50-53). There we see Jesus sharing a meal of fish and then leading them to the village of Bethany where he ascended or ‘withdrew from them’.

By the time you read this my family may know whether or not ‘the time has come’, in another sense. But in our case, God willing, it will be the delivery of a new grandchild to Lynn and myself and an addition to the household for Helen, Martin and Bethany. It is pretty clear that when a birth is expected, unless there is a sad mishap, there will be no stopping it! And you may know more about this than I do at the time of writing. The disciples, on the other hand, didn’t know what was expected. When they once asked Jesus for a group prayer he taught them to ask for the Father’s Kingdom to come. Surely that Kingdom would arrive now Christ had conquered death and he would reign as King. Surely this must mean the Roman legions would go and they would sit on thrones with Jesus as promised. Oh, how little they understood.

From our perspective we have the advantage of knowing that both Rome and the Temple would pass into history while the reign of Christ would grow and grow. When Jesus told the disciples of the coming of the Spirit it was in order that they could be witnesses to him, beginning where they were in Jerusalem and moving out in wider circles to encompass the whole world and every age to come. This was a project far bigger than the local politics of one nation and one age. And it is Luke with his broad grasp of history and the universal human condition who brings this into sharp focus. For our generation of Christians that is so fond of talking about God’s concern for the detail of our personal lives, we too should learn to wake up to the Father’s bigger plan. This is not to say we are too small to matter to God, only, that our everyday concerns, even of life and death, are part of a working out of a universal salvation that fulfils God’s purpose. Jesus is, of course, our personal Saviour but he is also ‘Lord of all’ and this is a necessary correction to thinking he is my God in my pocket. The Ascension is where we learn of Jesus’ presence in every place and time. He is no longer limited to the manger, the fishing boat or even the upper room. Christians, get a perspective!

In the Gospel passage Jesus turns from talking to the disciples and instead they listen in to his intimate conversation with the Father. Unlike the agony in the garden of Gethsemane where his prayer to Abba/Father is filled with pain, here he speaks in joy that the ‘hour has come’ because he is able to finish the work the Father has given him. The birth of the Kingdom has indeed arrived but rather than a political career Jesus is now “returning to the Father” to share the glory he had before all time. He also says he will no longer be in the world. So, does this mean his return will leave us bereft and alone? This is a tricky question and one where we need to get inside the Gospel writer’s thought. Remember when at Christmas we read... “the word was made flesh, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father.”. It is the same Jesus whose glory was seen in the flesh at his birth that is now to resume this glory with the Father. This means he is no longer limited by the flesh he took on himself. From now on he will be with them in a new way that is not limited to time, place or scale. This is the same theme of Christ’s universal Lordship we find in the account of the Ascension in Luke and Acts. Even though Jesus’ prayer is about this joyful heavenly ‘re-union’ with the Father he doesn’t forget the disciples. They are the very reason he came into the world.

Before a baby is born it is impossible to know the changes it will make in the lives of mum, dad and family. No words can express the new reality. But when the hour comes nothing is the same. And as for the Kingdom, it is already here, the hour has come, and we are still uncovering what it means in its fullness.

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