

Sunday Sermon Notes: 7th Sunday of Easter – 24th May 2020

From Rev Jilleen Chambers

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Although gatherings of up to ten people are now permitted, the diocese is not allowing us to have public worship services. Hopefully, there will be some relaxation of these restrictions when the government permits groups of up to twenty people – social distancing will continue, and we won't be permitted to sing. When you sing, your breath and any potential viruses are projected further than for normal breathing. We will have music and the words on the screen but no singing – sorry. Maybe we can hum along and sing to ourselves. And we won't be permitted to serve morning tea – maybe go for a take-away coffee in the park instead?

Today as I write, it is Thursday – Ascension Day – 40 days after Easter and the day we celebrate Jesus' ascension and return to glory with the Father. Because it happens on a Thursday, unless there are daily services, it passes mostly unnoticed in many churches. Our first reading for this Sunday, Acts 1: 6-14, records Jesus' ascension, and the promise that he would return. And Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit to empower his disciples to witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. We are the fruit of their faithful witness and the ongoing witness of the Church for near two thousand years.

About twenty years ago, I was asked by a teenage girl, why did Jesus leave us? And when you think about it, it is a very valid question. Jesus has been raised from the dead and is alive forevermore. Our world would be very different if he was still here physically. The answer is in Jesus' words in John 16: 7 – 'Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.'

The Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus, is now given to us to empower us to live and witness for him.

Have you ever heard the phrase: *lex orandi, lex credendi*? As I believe, so I pray. How and what we pray reveals what we believe about the one to whom we pray. Prayer is a means of communication directed to someone whom we believe can control the situations in our lives. We are asking for some form of intervention on our behalf. Why pray? And it is legitimate to question prayer as sometimes it seems as though our prayers don't go any further than the ceiling. We could ask: Does God routinely intervene in human affairs? Does his intervention – or lack of it – depend in any way on our asking? Can prayer "change" God? Change our circumstances? Change us? Sadly our prayers can be like a laundry list of needs or complaints. But Jesus prayed so there must be something in prayer.

Our gospel reading for this Sunday, the last Sunday before Pentecost, is from John 17: 1-11. It happens on Maundy Thursday, the evening before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, and we overhear Jesus' prayer to the Father, for himself and for his disciples. It is a prayer of passion and urgency and trust in his Father. It expresses Jesus' deep desire for the protection of his disciples as he will no longer be there to protect them. How does it make you feel to know Jesus prayed for you? See John 17: 20, 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word'. Jesus prayed for our protection so that we might be one as the Father and Jesus (and the Holy Spirit) are one. Our oneness is incredibly important to Jesus for it is a reflection of the relationship within the Godhead.

We are beings created for fellowship, with God and with each other. But no, we don't all have to look alike, dress alike or think alike. We are called to be one in Jesus Christ – all of us are part of his body on earth, the Church. (1 Corinthians 12: 12-31) However, this oneness is only possible if we are consciously living out Jesus' command to love one another just as he has loved us. Jesus prayed for our protection because there are many forces of evil that can come against us to destroy our oneness in Jesus – including our own ambitions and self-interest, apathy, fear, gossip, anger, resentment, jealousy, hatred, abuse, unforgiveness, and the list could go on and on.

Jesus believed in the power and importance of prayer and the gospels draw our attention to Jesus spending time in prayer. And if it was a necessity for Jesus, then it is certainly necessary for us. Prayer enables us to express our deepest desires and it can open us to an incredibly intimate relationship with God. When we pray with our hearts open and receptive, we draw closer to the one to whom we pray and we give Holy Spirit the opportunity to work in us and in the situation for which we pray. Importantly, we change and grow in our relationship and trust in God. Have you ever thought that the loving, close relationship Jesus has with the Father can also be ours?

There is another little gem in Jesus' prayer in John 17 that I want to draw your attention to: (John 17: 2-3) 'you have given [your Son] authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Did you catch that? *This is eternal life that they may know the Father and Jesus Christ.* When we know Jesus and the Father, eternal life starts now. Eternal life isn't a life reserved for the future after we die. We are spiritual beings whose life continues on past our physical death – death isn't the end. From the moment we come into a faith relationship with Jesus, he freely gives us eternal life. We don't have to earn it or strive for it through mighty deeds of faith. It is a free gift to everyone who loves Jesus.

In my Sermon Notes for the 10th May, I spoke about the Father's house as being more than a place: it is an abiding relationship with the Father. Eternal life, starting now, is an ongoing abiding relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is through an intimate prayer life that we begin to realise the fullness of an abiding presence with the Father who invites us to call him 'Abba', Daddy. The almighty and wondrous God to whom we pray, loves us so abundantly and welcomes us into an eternally abiding and intimate relationship here and now. Not tomorrow, but now and for always.

There are two hymns I want to share with you today. The first you will be familiar with, the second has great words and it will be easy for us to learn.

Filled with the Spirit's power, with one accord the infant church confessed its risen Lord:
O Holy Spirit, in the church today no less your power of fellowship display.

Now with the mind of Christ set us on fire, that unity may be our great desire:
give joy and peace; give faith to hear your call, and readiness in each to work for all.

And the second expresses the truth of eternal life in Christ:

Now is eternal life if risen with Christ we stand, in him to life reborn,
held firm within his hand; no more we fear death's ancient dread, in Christ arisen from the dead.

For God, the living God, stooped down to share our state; by death destroying death
Christ opened wide life's gate. He lives, who died; he reigns on high; who live in him shall never die.

Unfathomed love divine, come reign within my heart; from you no depth or height,
not life or death can part; my life with you in God shall be, now and through all eternity.

Blessing:

Christ our exalted King pour upon you his abundant gifts and bring you to reign with him in glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, our Creator, the Son, our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide, be among you and remain with you always.

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. In the name of Christ. Amen.