

Easter 7 Sermon 24-5-20
Rev Elizabeth Richardson

John 17:1-11 and Acts 1:6-14

In the church calendar, Ascension Day was celebrated last Thursday. In our Acts reading today we hear the second of Luke's accounts of Jesus' ascension to be with God. In the first account at the end of the Gospel of Luke, it is placed in the evening of Easter Day. In Acts, it is placed about 40 days later. There is no account of the ascension in either Matthew or John and only the briefest mention in Mark. Now, we know that particular numbers had significance in the Jewish traditions and so it is no surprise that this use of 40 days was one of those. In this setting, 40 days was the symbolic time needed for Jewish students to learn their master's teachings well enough to be able to repeat them. (J Chittister, *In Search of Belief*, P139). So, we understand that the disciples had spent time after the resurrection learning all that Jesus wanted them to be able to pass on to others. We can imagine them recounting to each other all that they had experienced with Jesus over their time moving around the country with him. They would have pondered the meaning of some things, sorted things out and at the end of that time been almost ready to be sent out in ministry. That would come 10 days later at Pentecost when they received the Holy Spirit.

Today's Gospel reading gives us the first part of John's understanding of the final prayer that Jesus gave as part of his summing up of his life's work. A final prayer was part of the typical structure of a biography in those days. It would not have been written down at the time of the Last supper but constructed by the writer to encapsulate all that was important about Jesus and his ministry.

Jesus asked God to give eternal life to all those people whom God had given to Jesus. And by eternal life he did not mean that they would live forever. Jesus was talking about his relationship with God and so also the relationship the disciples could have with God and also with Jesus. The word "Eternal" is used in the sense of depth of meaning rather than everlasting time. It is quality of life not quantity. His prayer promises us the ultimate depth of connection with God when we truly accept Jesus and God. God is love and we can have that loving connection with God that Jesus also had. Then, of course, we have to share that love with others. If we don't then we have not understood what relationship with God entails.

Eternal life is not about a promised place in heaven after our death. It is about the here and now. It is about our relationship with God and our fellow Christians and our neighbours everywhere. Eternal life does not save us from persecution or danger but we know that whatever happens to us, God is with us and loves and supports us. God had sent Jesus to minister to all people, although Jesus lived, necessarily, in one country. But that country was on a trade route between Egypt and Asia Minor and on to countries east and west. Israel had been taken over by various empires over the centuries for its strategic importance and in New Testament times was part of the Roman Empire. People from many countries lived in Israel or moved through it. Even within Israel, there were people whom the religious authorities dismissed - those with incurable disease like leprosy, the very poor, other social outcasts and women. You will recall that Jesus spoke with a woman from Samaria, he healed outcasts, he befriended the poor. So Jesus was sent not just to heal but to challenge the people to understand God's will for all people and to love God.

For all followers of Jesus, then and now, knowing and loving God is not just an intellectual thing. It also involves a life of following God's commandments and loving others within their community.

All of this the disciples had recalled and taken in so that after Pentecost, they were able to take the teachings of Jesus to people of other countries and to those who were not Jews. In verse 20, Jesus says "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word". The love of God was shared with so many that we have that legacy today. It is our task to share that love with others in our community.

In recent days I've been reading 'Phosphorescence: on awe, wonder & things that sustain you when the world goes dark'. It is a book by Julia Baird, journalist, historian and one of the hosts of The Drum on ABC

TV. Although only just published a few weeks ago, it was, of course, written before Covid19 but makes a richly rewarding book to read during this pandemic. Baird writes of the wonder of the natural world and the joy of friendship. She writes of the things that sustained her during the dark times, especially three times of hospitalisation with cancer and the friends who at much cost to themselves brought her food and walked the dog and all those things that supported her. She is a practicing Christian and speaks of her difficulties with the rigorous policy of her denomination's Sydney Diocese's opposition to women clergy. But still she attends church. Her faith is more important than particular practices.

When we find life difficult now, it is important to remember that God's love remains with us. God's creation is still around us even though humans have done so much to destroy it. There are still birds to watch and marvel at their colours and the sounds of their calls. The sky still changes colour through the day. Friends still connect by phone or email or zoom and even, a little, in person. The importance of friends has been impressed on us at this time.

How many more communications have you had during the last couple of months? So many of us are checking up on each other to make sure that they are OK. That home schooling while also working at home is not overwhelming. That finances are manageable. That the elderly have enough food or are not going stir crazy with no one to talk to. How are people managing when an elderly spouse or parent is in lockdown in a nursing home? When so many jobs are lost, what do you say to a young relative who has just handed in the final assignments for her degree and had been expecting to get a good job?

We have to understand that the Canberra population has, on average, a high level of education. Not everyone has the use of computers and the money to fund them that most of us do. Last week there was a story on the ABC TV of a year 12 boy in Victoria who is being brought up by his pensioner grandparents. He wants to get into the Air Force after school but is now home schooling and his grandparents cannot afford a computer for him. It is a bit hard just using a mobile phone. His grandmother said that she can use a telephone but nothing more complicated. Fortunately there was a group of people doing up old computers which, through the school, gave one and a wifi connection to the boy. This gave hope for the future to the boy. Sadly, the headmaster said that that boy was by no means alone in this predicament.

Keeping in touch with others in the community and giving practical help when we can are important in this time of pandemic and its economic outcomes.

Look again at today's readings. Jesus reassured his disciples that he would not be abandoning them. After he ascended to God, the Holy Spirit would come to them. They would continue to have that dependable relationship they had since they met him. Jesus made it clear that he had remained true to God and to his disciples – they had always been able to rely on him. In turn, they be true to Jesus and to God.

Good relationships are fundamental to the Christian life. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in his little book *Being Disciples*, has said that the faith we proclaim to others needs to show a dependable relationship just as Jesus had always been dependable. Julia Baird writes of the importance of faithful friendships that hold true to one another no matter what.

In these difficult times, surely it will be our constant dependability within our community of family, fellow Christians and neighbours, that will show the face of God to others. Then, we will be giving hope to others. Hope that life will continue, that new ways will be found even if we have to give up some loved practices. We Christians will give hope that love will overcome difficulties.

Make time while life is in this period of change to consider what the message Jesus brought means for us today. How does God want us to live? How should we relate to others? What should we do about it? We all need to think on these things.

Amen.