

Sermon 11 April 2021, second Sunday of Easter by Jenny Smith

(preached 18.4.21 due to the passing of HRH Prince Philip Duke of Edinburgh on 9.4.21)

Acts 4 32-35, John 20: 19-31

'May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight
O Lord my Rock and my Redeemer'

The Gospel reading for Low Sunday, the second Sunday of Easter is known as the story of 'Doubting Thomas'. It is a lovely story that bears repeating and we shall look at it, but what hit me as I looked up the set Lectionary readings for today was the direction that the set reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles was to be read in the Principal service and to take precedence over both the Old Testament reading (the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea) and the Epistle reading from the 1st letter of John, so that it is either the first or the second reading. So what is SO important about these few verses that tell of the early church- just after Pentecost?

It is only a few weeks on from when the disciples were cowering away in hiding for fear of further retribution from the Jewish leaders. They had been justifiably scared and the Resurrection appearances of Jesus were so unexpected that it is not surprising that Thomas could not believe it just on hearsay. Yet these few verses speak of a vibrant unified church, numbering in multiples of thousands, for when Peter had preached on the day of Pentecost. Acts chapter 2 records that over 3,000 were added that day and it then goes on to report that the Lord added daily to their number. These verses from Acts 4, echo what chapter 2 says in that the now multitude in the young church were all united heart and soul in what they believed, sharing all their possessions and goods in common, as anyone had need and withholding nothing so that everyone was cared for and the love of God shone through it.

So what were the disciples doing in those weeks between Easter Day and Pentecost? They were meeting together, yes, and probably recounting and reliving the teaching that Jesus had shared with them in the run up to his passion. The retelling of it must have taken root strongly for the teaching of the last few weeks and days of Jesus' earthly ministry takes up a fair proportion of the gospel writings. They were praying and waiting for the Holy Spirit, and in those times that they met with the risen Lord we are told that he reinforced and explained how he had to suffer and die to fulfil the teachings of the prophets.

That day when they met a week after the first Easter Sunday, they were still behind locked doors. Thomas, who had missed the earlier meeting with the risen Lord, makes his resounding declaration of faith, having been met and addressed personally by Jesus. Jesus in response to this, acknowledges that he needed to see for himself to believe -and yet in the next breath Jesus blesses all of us who have not seen him ourselves and yet have believed. I love this verse and also the verses recorded in chapter 17 where John records in some detail Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest: not just for himself, but for his disciples, and for those who will believe in him through their testimony – that they

may be one, united in God, just as the Trinity is one, so that the whole world may believe that God the Father sent him.

We too have had not just weeks but, in some cases, months of being shut away- not in fear of persecution but to stop the spread of a potentially deadly disease. As we start to meet together again in this the season of Easter 2021 we too should be **praying** and asking the Spirit to come, for it is **when we unite and pray in accordance with His will** that God **blesses his church and causes it to grow**. There are several initiatives that we can plug into at present that are all working together to unite as Christians across denominations and round the world to answer this call. I will mention 2:

‘**Thy Kingdom Come**’ is one that was started by Archbishops Justin Welby and John Sentamu in 2016 for the worldwide Anglican Communion to pray for the Holy Spirit to come and work through us- each praying for 5 other people to come to faith, particularly in the 10 days between Ascension and Pentecost. The movement has grown on an annual basis and has also been endorsed by Pope Francis and the Roman Catholic Church, Methodists, Baptists and Pentecostals to name a few. I encourage you too to join in the prayer for God’s Kingdom to come in the here and now, you don’t need to wait for Ascension Day to pray for 5 people on a regular basis, and to look for opportunities to share your faith story.

There is also a **National day of prayer and worship** on Pentecost Sunday (23rd May) – with a prayer meeting at 2pm. Look up www.virtualpentecost.com to find out details and sign up to join with Christians from around the country and across different denominations to pray for our country. There are already several thousand people and churches signed up to join this 2 hour prayer gathering to pray for Unity, healing and for the Church to grow all around our land.

I do not think the Lord will guide us to give up everything as in the early church but he does ask us to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to love one another and to be generous to those in need and share his love. Let us pray.