

An Address by Alison Whiting for Sunday 24th May 2020 - 7th Sunday of Easter

The disciples had been through it, in those last few weeks leading up to our reading from Acts; an emotional roller coaster of Good Friday – and the feelings of profound loss and desolation, followed by rumours that Jesus was alive and that there was hope...and then Jesus was back with them again.

At the beginning of this reading we heard, the disciples seem to be expecting life to go on as normal – if not better than before. Jesus appears happy to give them his full and undivided attention – with no preaching, teaching or outside commitments. He listens to them and answers their questions patiently.

But then suddenly, they find out that Jesus isn't actually going to be staying with them - and that he expects them to carry on without him.

Trudging back to Jerusalem, back to the upper room, we can perhaps imagine how flat they're all feeling... poor disciples, one minute they're in the 'inner circle' - the next, they're leaderless. Jesus refuses point blank to tell them what's happening ('It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority...'). And they have been left an extremely daunting job, being Jesus' 'witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'.

But in all this, they would have learnt 2 things in particular; to stick together no matter what, and the importance of keeping on praying...

In our Gospel reading from John, these themes of community and of prayer, are also present.

Jesus knows that the disciples will feel bereft after his ascension, so he prays to his Father for protection for them – he really intercedes for them. They will need the strength and encouragement from each other too, in order to continue.

Right here and now, for us too, the themes of community and of prayer are perhaps more vital than ever.

While lots of people are living in isolation, in fear, uncertainty, loneliness or anxiety, now is the time for church communities to be creative and really live out what we're about, within the current restrictions.

My current work in the RD&E Chaplaincy has made me very aware of the impact of some of the restrictions at present; patients are not allowed any friends or family to visit them, unless they have come to the very end of their lives. How long the days must seem for them. I have seen several patients though, who have told me that they have felt incredibly supported by their church communities; through cards and messages, and assurance of prayers, even though they are not able to physically *see* the people they love.

Although we cannot yet enter our places of worship and meet together, we can still offer worship and meet with God wherever we are, so now, more than ever, 'the Church' means the body of people, rather than mere bricks and mortar. After all the journey of faith is to be travelled in fellowship with others, forming a community from which we can both give and receive encouragement, support, teaching and love; and in this way, and by the Holy Spirit, the Church becomes so much greater than the sum of its parts.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus prays for his own mission, then for his immediate disciples, and finally for *all* who will become his disciples down the ages – which includes us. Hearing his prayer, we share a privileged moment; as Jesus speaks directly to his Father. It is the night before his arrest and crucifixion. How might Jesus have been feeling?

So we stand on holy ground, if you like, as we hear his prayer. You might like to re-read this prayer of Jesus later on today; not necessarily trying to understand or analyse it, but letting the words and the overall feeling they create, sink into your heart. Then you may gain a glimpse into the relationship between Jesus and his Father – a relationship that is also available to us.

Our Gospel reading ends with Jesus praying for unity amongst his followers, that 'they (ie we) may be one, as we are one'.

Unity does not mean becoming mindless clones of one another, thank goodness. Rather, it means being our true, full selves, whilst embracing and respecting differences, not letting petty disagreements or resentments grow and fester, but working together towards furthering God's kingdom in our everyday lives, as well as in our church communities.

So let us pray; Lord, may we be aware of your presence through these uncertain times. Help us to be faithful in prayer, and strong in community.
Amen