

Sunday 13th May, 2018
Ascension Day (t/f from 10th May) - Year B

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 93
Ephesians 1:15-23
Mark 16:15-20

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

A couple of years ago now, Archbishop Welby preached on the occasion of this Feast Day in the beautiful church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London. Unsurprisingly, given my previous association with the parish of St. Martin's in Melbourne, I feel a great affinity with the congregation at that St. Martin's over there, although it is true that their church has been around a little longer than the one in which I previously ministered!! Only by 150 years or so!

In his sermon that night, Justin proposed that “(the Ascension) is about power or victory, but not as we know it.” (repeat) And I suspect that the church throughout the ages has been wrestling with the same confusion about what this feast really means.

Think about the sort of words we have heard today in our readings - words like ‘power’, ‘glory’, ‘witness’, ‘proofs’, and ‘authority’. For the disciples who hear these words, they think that if power is going to be given to them surely that means conquest and victory? If Jesus speaks of a Kingdom, surely they are about to see it?

This is not the case. Rather, the power contained within this feast is not about *our* power at all. The ascension of Christ to the right hand of God is the ascendancy, the rise, the elevation, the promotion of **Christ** to the position of all authority in heaven and on earth. But the Ascension does not denote some sort of cosmological location, but it is a poetic way of saying that God has now given all authority to Christ.

Most importantly, the ascension of Christ does not lead to the absence of Christ, but to his ongoing presence everywhere. This is why the risen Christ says, “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

In the Ascension, Christ now “fills all things everywhere with himself.” There is now no place where Christ is not, and there is now domain over which Jesus is not Lord.

But I think it is fair to say that is not how most Christians have thought about the Ascension over the years. And this has had a detrimental effect upon our theology – especially our political theology.

If we end the gospel story of Jesus by saying... “And then Jesus went off to heaven (which is why he’s not here), but someday he will come back and bring in the kingdom of God...” then this leads to the conclusion that we are free to run the world the way we want to in what we assume is the *absence* of Christ. What this does is demote Jesus from being the Eternal Lord “seated at God’s right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,” to being some sort of Lord-Elect in exile.

If we imagine Jesus as being off somewhere in heaven waiting to come back someday and begin his reign, then we default to the idea that those in authority are free to rule the world in the way they believe best in the absence of Christ. And in that case, I’ve got to ask the question expressed in popular idiom, “how’s that working out for you?”

How does the world look at the moment, with those in authority acting in this manner? How’s the state of the environment? How’s the moral compass looking? How’s the peace and harmony amongst humanity?

Not so good, I think...

The Holy Spirit given as God's gift does not give us the power to fight, to attack each other, to hate, to destroy - but another sort of power - the power to love, to witness, to declare repentance for those things that destroy life and forgiveness; a power that liberates us to a new future. What could be more important than the message Jesus' followers are left to proclaim? What can be more essential to that message than the gift of power from God; power to liberate not dominate, to bring life not law, freedom not fear?

One of the primary roles of the church - one that we perhaps have not done so well - is to be a prophetic witness in the name of the Lord Jesus advocating for peace, mercy, and justice. The church calls those in authority to obey Christ by promoting peace among the nations, prioritizing provision for the poor, and providing justice for the most vulnerable.

This is not to say that the church is to function as some sort of party-pooper; throwing cold water on everything, but rather that it is to act as a prophetic witness and an embodied presence of the King of kings. The contemporary task of the church is to make Christianity prophetic again. We must recover our vocation as a prophetic witness for the risen and ascended Christ. But to do this we must actually believe that Jesus is Lord of the nations here and now, and that all kings and governments, peoples and nations are called to obey the Son of God. And that is the thrust of this feast day today.

Ascension is about power or victory, but not as we know it. The Ascension sets our destination, and in its compelling conquest assures us of the promises and mission that catch hold of us and compel us to change our world; never to despair, always to endure, to rejoice, to celebrate, to tolerate our failings, patiently to endure suffering - knowing that the victory of Jesus the Christ is certain.

The Lord be with you...