

Sunday 28th May, 2017 - Easter 7
Year A
Acts 17: 22-31
Psalm 66:7-19
1 Peter 3:8-22
John 14:15-21

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

One of the things about which we in the church may sometimes feel a little uncomfortable is the language that we use in our liturgies and our readings. After all, if you were a visitor to a church like ours, having not been brought up in the faith, or unfamiliar with it, you would probably scratch your heads a little at some stages of our service, as we talk about the Passover Lamb, or the word penitence, or when the psalm today calls us to “ascribe power to God”.

Yes, I think that sometimes in the church we might be a little apologetic about our language - and of course, there are many churches in the Anglican tradition and others who have tried to overcome this by rejecting any of this language, and trying to use what would best be described as popular idiom.

In my opinion, however, this does a dis-service to us and our faith. You see, there is a good reason why our language is as it is. Quite simply, the events which shaped Christianity are so strange and wonderful that they shatter all conventional categories of explanation and understanding, so the church has no choice but to employ liturgical, lyrical, and doxological speech instead. The language we use is the result of the church straining imaginatively to find language adequate to the newness that swirls around the terminating events of the life of Jesus.

Our speech, then, matches the newness that is beyond any usual experience or explanation. The unique nature of the events around Jesus concerns the new rule of God and the in-breaking of a new age on earth, so normal language simply won't do.

Our focus in the entire Easter season is on that new rule which breaks the grip of all that is old, tired, deathly, and enslaving.

Today, then, to voice this newness, the Psalm shows the church using the ancient language of enthronement. That language originally was “sanctuary drama,” based around the worship in the Temple, and now it is Jesus through whom the drama of God’s power is brought to fruition. Jesus becomes the key player in God’s drama.

This new rule of God, however, is not in these texts preoccupied primarily with God or with the ascended Jesus. These events are instead given a communal sense. Because this new rule concerns the community of believers; all our readings today rethink how this community can be formed in response to Jesus’ new governance. What difference does it make for day-to-day faith and practice?

In the reading from Acts, the community accepting this new oversight is called to be a bold witness in the world, sustained by a disciplined life of prayer. This text starts the church of Acts on an astonishing career of freedom and courage in the world.

The other two New Testament readings are even more pastoral in their presentation of the authority of Jesus. The Epistle reading from St. Peter addresses people who are in the midst of suffering, hurt, and need. On the one hand, they are called to have faith in the powerful hope of God’s eventual and full triumph. Someday it will all be made right, and the church counts heavily on that assurance.

On the other hand, however, the reading concerns the present; the suffering and hurt in which they live, and the need to practice discipline. That is, those who are believers are not to give in, or to quit, but are to hold to a hopeful discernment of the present as the place where faith is to be given and to be lived. As we hear yet again this week the plight of our Coptic brothers and sisters, I can’t help but imagine how they hold on in faith.

The Gospel reading then portrays the church under the power of God's resolve, being given a new identity and vocation in the world. Being "prayed for" by Jesus completely repositions and redefines the church. It is no longer a body of helpless, frightened folk who are confused about the future. Rather, it is a community that belongs to God and is freed for God's massive purposes in the world.

One of the most powerful things about my first tentative enquiries with the Diocese of Melbourne toward Ordination was that, at the completion of my interview with the Bishop in charge of the discernment process, he prayed for me - we sat there, just the two of us, and he prayed that God would strengthen me on my path, and that I would be enlightened in my discernment process. He prayed for my family, and for those who would work with me in my discernment and formation. Looking back, I see how important that was, and I wonder whether we do that enough - commit to really praying intentionally for one another?

And so now the disciples hear Jesus praying for them - a deeply personal prayer to the Creator of the world, a prayer for strength and courage, for discernment of the way forward, and of protection against trials and tribulations. Jesus knows what he himself will face in the coming days, and he knows that the fledgling church will face similar opposition and the response of violent people. And so he prays for them.

At this time in the church, between the two feasts of Ascension and Pentecost, Christians from all around the world are coming together in prayer. This global wave of prayer is called "Thy Kingdom Come", and it has been instigated by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. Churches in most countries around the world have pledged to join the movement, and there is an event planned for St. Paul's Cathedral here in Melbourne next Saturday evening at 6pm.

In commending the event to the Diocese, Dean Andreas has said “Prayer is the heartbeat of the Church. Asking God ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ in our time is a simple act that each of us can share. I believe that when we all share in intentional sustained prayer God will transform us, and the world we live in.”

All our readings today show the church at work, seeking to embrace, embody, and enact its convictions in the world. The new rule of God promised through Christ and enacted and enlivened by the Spirit permits new human life in the world. Such new human life is not easy, but it is possible. That new life requires discipline, but it is also marked by a relentless buoyancy that refuses the despair of the world and the seduction of the world.

All this is possible only through the miraculous and saving events of Easter. As we come to the end of this season, let us continue to be resurrection people, because as we continue to live in the world we are called to transform it. Because of Easter, and because Jesus prays for us, this community of which we are a part is indeed an Easter-powered community!

In the name of God, Amen.