

Caught in the Updraft: The Sunday after Ascension

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia, 16 May 2021

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5: 9-13; John 17: 6-19

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Sometime or other you may have been questioned about your Christian belief or wondered about it yourself—about belief in God, perhaps, or about belief in Jesus Christ, which is woven inextricably into Christian belief in God as our readings testify today. Many Christians don't make that strong connection themselves, content with Jesus the moral teacher and God as a more remote hypothesis. Or if their God is more personal their belief may not be at all specific. And many Christians describe their belief as a very private thing, which brings further difficulties when they're confronted by that line in the creed about believing in the Church, which can seem pretty dubious, derivative, and perhaps just an optional extra to Christian believing. Yet today's readings also weave the Church inextricably into Christian belief in God and in Christ: "As you have sent me into the world," says John's Jesus to his Father in our Gospel, "so I have sent them into the world". This is what abiding in the vine means and being chosen by Jesus rather than our choosing him—the message of

Christian belonging that Fr Martin explained last week, and which needs to be explained since many Christians can't make much sense of it.

Today on this last Sunday of the Easter Season, the Sunday after Ascension, we're invited to consider the questions and perplexities of Christian belief from another perspective. Not as speculative outsiders with minds already formed by other agendas and priorities, who then ask how God and Christ let alone Church might fit in with those agendas and priorities. This is how the question of belief is often asked and, sadly, even answered today. Rather, today's readings remind us that we come at believing in God and Christ and Church as insiders, not outsiders.

The leading Australian Catholic theologian, Fr Tony Kelly, has a lovely image of the Church caught in the updraft of the Ascension. I'm going to expand on that. Imagine looking out on a clear Summer's day over an expanse of countryside when the gliding club is busy getting itself aloft. You watch glider after glider circling and climbing in an updraft, like eagles do. They find that cylinder of rising hot air and up they go, lofted together without the need of individual engines—caught up collectively, graciously, with the necessary effort limited to sticking together and not losing the updraft.

Friends, this is how to understand today's readings, so that our believing and doubting are put into a properly Christian context. Our Christian believing is formed within the community of those who've learned to think about God through Jesus Christ, to know Jesus Christ as God with us, which takes place within the nurturing environment of Christian togetherness, of word and sacrament. Christian faith begins within the Church's fellowship rather than isolated in the secular imagination where belief in God and Christ and Church are separated and typically regarded as optional.

When John's Jesus warns his disciples in today's Gospel that the world will reject them just as it rejected him, because they don't belong to the world, this reflects the Church's odd position as I've been presenting it. We stand apart from a world of competing beliefs, stubbornly held positions, fake news, and violent ideologies, because we receive faith in Jesus Christ as a gift that lifts us into a different world, and takes us there together, not leaving us as isolated seekers or else as competing rivals. So, if Jesus is Lord, which is the message of Ascension, then his Lordship means liberation from the culture wars, from cancel culture, from America's Big Lie, from selling out to cynical self-interest, and from religion used as a harsh weapon of social control. In other words, orthodox Christian credal belief in the nexus of God, Christ and Church represents a freeing participation rather than an assertion of superiority over anyone, or

else a half-belief that we can't really justify against all the other things in this secular world that we take more seriously.

So, let's not stumble into trying to argue or justify Christian belief on the same ground that unbelievers and disbelievers occupy—not in our pastoral ministry, not in our parenting or grandparenting, and not in our own dark moments of doubt or confusion. Instead let's remember that we don't approach Christian believing as isolated spectators on the ground, but as participants caught up together in the updraft of Jesus' Ascension, where we're blessed with a different perspective. And the proof of this doctrinal pudding is in the eating, which comes through our giving ourselves together to the life of faith, standing together in the Eucharist and lifting up our hearts as God and the priest invite us to do.

One last thing in this discussion of what Catholic belief is and how Catholic believing works. Pentecost and Trinity Sunday are just around the corner, when this picture of Christian life in God is made complete: at Pentecost the Catholic Church, all of it in one room, is drawn into God's own life in Christ through the Holy Spirit, and this Trinitarian language shapes how God is to be known and celebrated ever after.

But in Luke's telling of the story, which we're following in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit does something today in the gap that Luke gives us between Jesus' Ascension and the pouring out of His Spirit on the whole Church at Pentecost. Today we hear about the symbolic number twelve being restored to the apostolic band, after the death of Judas the betrayer. The Spirit helps them choose Matthias and so the Church's link to the twelve tribes of Israel, connecting God's past and future faithfulness, is re-established. What I notice here is that the Spirit is not poured out on the whole Church until the Church has been prepared to receive it—until the Spirit has given the Church a structure suitable for receiving and nurturing this gift.

The calling of apostles back then, and of their successors the bishops ever since, represents the first instalment of the Spirit's gift that comes fully at Pentecost. This is a piece of Catholic wisdom about how God works, and it's a different story than the one you'll hear from Christians who claim individual authority from the Spirit, and especially when the Spirit supposedly tells them to reject and separate themselves from other Christians. This is not to downplay the role of the Spirit in guiding the Church from the bottom up in favour of a clericalism that looks for God's guidance and authority from the top down. It's simply the recognition that God leads the Church both structurally as well as charismatically, with a place for

episcopal order as well as general inspiration. And Church history, to my reading of it, is a story of both principles working together.

Friends, this is all part of being caught up together in the updraft, rather than puttering around in the atmosphere under our own steam, making what we can of God and Christ, let alone the Church. The God who evokes and invites our believing gives us more help than that.

The Lord be with you ...