



# FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

SUNDAYS OF EASTER YEAR A

COLIN DUNDON  
EASTER 2023

**FROM FEAR TO WITNESS**

**CONTENTS**

Introduction..... 1

Study One—Second Sunday of Easter Year A..... 5

Study Two—Third Sunday of Easter Year A..... 13

Study Three—Fourth Sunday of Easter Year A..... 21

Study Four—Fifth Sunday of Easter Year A..... 28

Study Five—Sixth Sunday of Easter Year A..... 35

Study Six—Seventh Sunday of Easter Year A..... 43

**FROM FEAR TO WITNESS**  
**SUNDAYS OF EASTER YEAR A**

**INTRODUCTION**

We have now completed two of our parish sessions on missional spirituality. We have journeyed through Lent to Easter; from death to life. We await the outpouring of the Spirit of life at Pentecost. In this season, that occurs between Easter day and Pentecost, we might be tempted to go to sleep, relaxing back into old ways and worries.

We know, for instance, that we have serious problems with some of our buildings that will require much attention and possibly heartache in decision making. It is proper for the rector and wardens to warn us of such things. However, I sometimes think that is like talking about adapting to floods and fires without paying attention to the catastrophe of climate change. Both are important and both need addressing; it's just that one is more dangerous and destructive than the other, although one seems more immediate and the other seems a long way off. Both are with us.

The unacknowledged "climate change" for the church in Australia started back in the 1960's. Christendom had died before that, but our forebears lived on its carcass until the present day. Today sun-bleached bones are all that remains. As Christendom died in our lifetimes so did its various forms of mission and evangelism. Sunday schools, youth fellowships, evangelistic missions, the parish priest doing everything according to the prayer book, the geographical parish being the centre of everything, adult study groups. Eventually something we did not pay attention to eroded it all.

The West deliberately walked away from its Christian heritage and chose an entirely new and experimental way of living. That deserves a study in its own right but not here. I trust that will be part of our studies in missional spirituality.

Culture has changed. We cannot repeat the past, only the carcass remains. We are starting in a new world order in the Western church. It is a new missional situation. If we do not address that we will no longer be here to worry about the buildings. It is already happening around us if we have our eyes open.

A whole society is deliberately walking away from the Christian faith, replacing it with another that has many facets; intellectual, moral, political, social, economic, and spiritual. The church is reduced to a small business, competing against the very big players that have more resources and clout. There is no space in the market for small time spiritual irrelevancies.

The danger for Christian folk is that we can accept this definition of our situation as true, accept its relativism, see ourselves as a form of spiritual or religious club interested in antiquities, depending on taste, and accept our relegation to the world of the private, obscure, and exotic.

The Roman world relegated Jesus and his followers in much the same way, first as a Jewish cult then as part of the effluent of the ancient world that flowed out of the Middle East and Egypt and into the Roman empire. Our ancestors refused that designation. It is that refusal and what they responded with that made them an intellectual and spiritual force that Rome could not counter.

My view is that, though our situation is different, our spiritual ancestors had some foundation that seems to elude us. We need to expose and explore what gave them courage and hope.

We are going to be dealing with two very slippery words; one is mission and the other is spirituality. Both are loaded with baggage. I can't give a long discussion of the history their meanings, and all the baggage, so I will tell you how I will try to use the words, hopefully as consistently as I can. Neither definition is original but contains a mixture of ideas that I hope make sense. I trust as you go you will make your own definitions, adding, subtracting, and finding new ways of expressing our calling.

In Christianity spirituality includes a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit and in the context of the community of believers sharing a similar relationship, which is nourished by the experiences and practices that support the relationship. Spirituality is concerned with the conjunction of theology, prayer, and practical Christianity.

The word mission has two parts to it. The first is 'sent-ness', and the second is the purpose for the 'sent-ness'. So, I think one way to put this together is to say that mission for God's people is all that God the Father, in Jesus Christ, and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is doing in God's great purpose for the restoration and renewal of the whole of creation and all he calls us to do in cooperation with that purpose.

The broadness of these definitions allows us to find the specifics we need and pull them together for our specific calling in our place and time. Also, I hope you can spot the connections between spirituality and mission.

Where to start? Someone wisely noted that the Bible is the sort of text that calls for interpretation not only by means of writing more text about it, but also by the practice of what it preaches. Could anyone really understand what means to love enemies without doing it, or at least seeing it done?

Although we are not the initiators of God's mission, we are crucial agents in its display to our world. We interpret, in our lives, what the Gospel is and what it means for the whole world. Our neighbours might need to see what it means to love the enemy, or perhaps, just the neighbour. Here are some thoughts:

The gospel story . . . defines the life of the Christian and the life of the Church, while the life of the Church and the life of the Christian is, correspondingly, a retelling and reinterpreting of that gospel story. The world has no access to the gospel story other than as it is narrated in the life, worship, and proclamation of the Church. . . . Through its service and being as witness, the Church is a rendering of the gospel to the world.

Gorman, Michael J. *Becoming the Gospel*. (p. 1). Eerdmans.

I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic [means of interpretation] of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*.

Evangelism is intrinsically relational, the outcome of love of neighbour, for to love our neighbour is to share the love of God holistically. The proper context for evangelism is authentic Christian community, where the expression of loving community is the greatest apologetic for the gospel.

Heath, Elaine A., *The mystic way of evangelism*. 2008, p.13

Each author is making the same point and the two sentences that stand out for me are: "Through its service and being as witness, the Church is a rendering of the gospel to the world" and "I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic [means of interpretation] of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it."

Another way of putting this is that Bible is the sort of text that calls for interpretation not only by means of more text but also by the practice of what it preaches. Could anyone really understand what it means to love enemies without doing it, or at least seeing it done?

That will be the aim of these studies; to explore, in these particular texts, the sent-ness of the interpretative community and the spirituality that gives it life.

Some key questions we will keep on asking ourselves are:

What do these texts say, implicitly or explicitly, about God's purposes for the creation, including humans. (That is sometimes called the *missio Dei*).

What do these texts reveal about humanity and the world?

What do these texts say about the nature and mission of God's people in the world, that is, about the church understood as an agent of divine mission.

In what concrete ways, in our specific context, might we deliberately read this text as God's call to us as the people of God to participate in the *missio Dei* to which it bears witness?

What does the text reveal about the spiritual resources available for us as God's agents?

In this introduction I think we need to address an elephant in the room. Respectable Anglicans do not do mission. Some do, but they belong to a particular movement within Anglicanism and they reduce mission to cult-like evangelism. It becomes a specialised and manipulating technique to get individuals into heaven, possibly only specially chosen ones.

Let me suggest that this is a mistaken view. The best way to find out what our church thinks about mission is to look for it in our prayer book. A good place to start is at the end of the weekly Eucharist. It is titled THE SENDING OUT OF GOD'S PEOPLE (P.143 if you are interested) and it is full of prayers about this sending out. Perhaps we could meditate on the following quotes from the prayers, remembering that we have just participated in Christ's Body and Blood and received God's blessing in His Presence in the risen Lord and the Spirit:

...help us to grow in love and obedience that we may serve you in the world...

May we who have reached out our hands to receive this sacrament be strengthened in your service; we who have sung your praises tell of your glory and truth in our lives....

May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. **Keep us in this hope that we**

**have grasped; so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name.**

Most loving God,

**you send us into the world you love. Give us grace to go thankfully and with courage in the power of your Spirit.**

After every Sunday's nourishment and refreshment, we are sent to serve God's purposes.

Colin Dundon

Easter 2023

## FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

### STUDY ONE—SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

#### Acts 2.14a, 22-32

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

<sup>22</sup> ‘You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth,\* a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—<sup>23</sup>this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. <sup>24</sup>But God raised him up, having freed him from death,\* because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. <sup>25</sup>For David says concerning him,

“I saw the Lord always before me,

for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;

<sup>26</sup> therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope.

<sup>27</sup> For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption.

<sup>28</sup> You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

<sup>29</sup> ‘Fellow Israelites,\* I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. <sup>30</sup>Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. <sup>31</sup>Foreseeing this, David\* spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah,\* saying,

“He was not abandoned to Hades,

nor did his flesh experience corruption.”

<sup>32</sup>This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

With this excerpt from Peter’s speech on the day of Pentecost we begin our journey. We will journey all the way to Pentecost but there is much we need to learn as the disciples did so long ago.

Peter begins his reply to his interlocutors who suggest that the ravings of the apostles have all the authority, and relevance of a drunken tirade and comical pantomime. The speech goes from verse 14 to 36, but we will look at only the portion chosen.

This speech highlights for us three key elements of mission. God has a plan for the world, the resurrection of Christ is critical, and the newly founded body of believers are witnesses.

First, this whole story of mission is about God and what God is doing. It makes the point clearly that Jesus is central and critical to mission. God’s story, whatever it is, is the story of Jesus. It is not about some generalised idea of God, some philosophical musing for the entertainment of the enlightened or those wealthy enough to have spare time. It is highly specific; it is located in space and time and a specific human being. God acts in human culture to achieve whatever God’s goals are. They are not clear in this portion.

Second, Peter directs the attention of his readers to Jesus. He speaks of Jesus' humanity and cultural and geo-political location. Whatever the good news is it is humanly and culturally located. It is not generalised musings about morality or religion. It is specific.

This Jesus comes with the authority and attributes of God. He may have no authority in his cultural and political setting, but God works through him. He did not think great thought but acted like God acted. We need to remember at this point that Luke wrote both the Gospel and Acts and, as Peter reminded his audience, they knew that. Signs, deeds of power, wonders were not part of an apocalyptic terror campaign to frighten people from hell to heaven, but were signs of what God was planning for the created order; freedom from death and decay, freedom from distorting effects of sin and freedom from slavery to forces greater than our weak and fragile selves.

However, those forces got to work and destroyed him; they crucified him. They were at ease. The power of God's life and love exceeded their imaginations and expectations. This one cannot be held in the power of hatred, greed, love of power and status. Now the light begins to dawn on God's future.

This had always been God's plan. The psalms that Peter quotes (16.811 and 132.11) provide that clue. Jesus is not a new beginning but a new chapter in a long drama. These old texts show how God would never let death win. Psalm 116 is a lament that expresses trust in God's power to deliver from harm. Such trust leads from despair exultation and joy in the Presence of the Living God. In that life and light triumph over corruption, decay, and abandonment among the dead.

Third, at the very end Peter addresses his place in this story. He, and all his fellow disciples, are witnesses to this miracle of life over death. We will return to this theme again and again in Acts because it is a fundamental description of a group of believers. In Acts 1.8, which we will discuss later in this series witnessing is world encompassing.

The important note here is that these witnesses are not some smug chosen few, given some secret knowledge. Their knowledge of life is for all.

### *Question*

Praying through this text what is most important element of this story for you?

Have you discovered something new? Note that, and pray it into your life.

### **1 Peter 1.1-12**

<sup>1</sup>Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup>who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, <sup>\*</sup> even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the genuineness of your



faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup>Although you have not seen\* him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup>for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

<sup>10</sup> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, <sup>11</sup>inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated, when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. <sup>12</sup>It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

### ***Greetings (verse 1-2)***

We will read and explore selected passages from the First Letter of Peter. It can be described as one of the most beautiful and compelling books in the New Testament. It is rich in its understanding of Christ and his Church, salvation, and hope, and living a peaceable and loving life in a hostile world. Our question to the readings will be: How can they help us grapple with God's mission in our world? How can the text help us to listen to the Spirit in our world?

Letters usually began in its simplest form Mary to John, greetings. You can see how Peter expands the simple form in verses 1-2. He begins with his name and then adds an important qualifier. He has a title 'apostle'. It is a title for an authorised agent or representative. It is not a title of status but of function. His only status is to perform the function for which he is sent. In this case he is the agent of Jesus Christ. His authority is derived and dependent on that of Jesus Christ and no-one else. He is the agent to carry out Jesus Christ's mission, no more and no less. It is a very humble designation.

#### *Question*

Reflect on Peter's authority. It is a high calling, but its chief virtue is humility. How might this be an important insight for us in our mission and spirituality?

Peter then addresses his readers, a multiracial, multicultural, multi-religious group of people with wide gaps in social and socio-economic status. They mostly live north of the Taurus mountains in Turkiye in widely diverse geographical and local political locations. What can possibly hold them together?

Sometimes we are tempted to look at the human and sociological aspects of the church and see only a seriously deficient human organisation. No matter how hard we look we may find little to encourage us. The same applied to our ancient brothers and sisters. Indifference, intellectual, social, or political hostility as well as the depressing and the sometime evil character of the institutions' behaviour may discourage us.

On the other hand, Peter discerns something quite different (verse 2). What he discerns is a people who have a vocation to carry out God's purposes in obedience to Jesus who died for them, bringing them home into a loving relationship. The Spirit is the one living resource who transforms their lives into living images of the holy God with whom they are reconciled. They are to be people of grace and peace imitating Jesus.

*Question*

Does Peter's greeting help us to discern the church's calling and its spiritual resources?

***A living hope 1.3-12***

Peter is addressing his brothers and sisters in a time of anxiety and an oppressive sense of insecurity as the Empire flexes its muscles. The letter indicates that the disciples are alarmed. So, Peter counters with a prayer (verses 3-9) that is full of hope. Fear and self-pity have no place in this living faith. Thanksgiving and praise are the key-notes of the disciple. The praise is specific about who deserves such praise: the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The central focus for this beautiful prayer is verse 6; suffering and trouble and the shame and exclusion they bring into our lives. This topic will arise again and again in this little letter. It will be taken very seriously, but not in the way of victimhood, but in joy and blessing.

Now we can understand Peter's recitation of the blessings we have in Jesus Christ as disciples. It begins with new birth into a living hope, not futile wishful thinking but grounded in the sure sign of God's new creation in the resurrection. The corrupting, ravaging and destructive power of death over life and beauty is done. Life and beauty are fadeless.

For the moment we wait for that. We wait in trust, but not with gritted teeth. Our trust is grounded in deep mutual love even though we cannot "see" (note Thomas in John's Gospel below). We do know because we love Jesus Christ and in living that trusting love we find joy, the indescribable but presently experienced taste of the future. The future is the joy of unlimited trustworthiness, beauty, and love. That is salvation. (Soul is not some ethereal part of us. It encompasses the whole human being).

Suffering comes to us all; it is inescapable, and it will test out our love and trust and joy. As in all relationships that suffering will test our relationship with Christ; our trust in his faithfulness, love, and promises. Joy seems a far-off memory, an illusion even.

*Question*

In the present in which we find ourselves what might some resources for hope?  
Reflect on your

How can we care for each other in suffering?

What might it look like to live lives of joy and blessing even in bad times, that are not fake? Are there clues in the reading that indicate how that might be possible?

In our present times and circumstances is there something in our story that might help or encourage our friends and neighbours?

***1.10-12 A little reminder***

Peter reminds his readers that this salvation is not a new philosophy or self-help remedy, cooked up in obscure circumstances; there were plenty of those in their world just as in ours. It is grounded God's long, turbulent history with his ancient people, Israel. They lived their journey of trust, love, suffering and disobedience and despair in the Spirit, always looking for the day of Christ's great suffering and also great glory. Their labour in faith and trust is their gift to us and also their challenge in our circumstances. After all, they faced joy

and sorrow, at home and facing exile, despair at loss, humiliation, and liberation. They trudged their journey to serve us.

The other reminder is that other creatures, angels, long to see the wonder of this glory. It blows their minds and imaginations that God would do such a thing as to subject himself to human violence, risk death, then overcome it all for the sake of the human creatures and the world they live in.

I understand that some readers may find Peter's aside about salvation puzzling. We cannot let the experiences of ancient Israel fade into forgetfulness no matter how strange it seems to us. They still interrogate us in uncomfortable ways as well as give us hope and comfort. To ignore them is to disdain and dishonour their pain and faithfulness and eventually we starve ourselves to death.

And as for angels, whatever the cosmic created is or contains it is in awe of God's great design for us and our world. No matter how small we are we are not insignificant as some may claim or we may feel.

### *Question*

In our journey from fear to witness where has Peter led you? Whatever that place is stay with it for a time.

### **John 20.19-31**

<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin\*), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe\* that Jesus is the Messiah,\* the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

On Easter day we celebrated that first morning, the new day dawning, the possibilities of a new creation bursting forth on an unsuspecting world. Here is the centre of the Christian faith, not Christmas. Who would celebrate Christmas if there was no resurrection?

Today we arrive at the evening of that day, the first day. Mary Magdalene has already come to the disciples on the explicit command of Jesus with an explicit message. He has come through death and his enthronement (ascension) is imminent. The power of death to overcome life is demolished.

Mary Magdalene becomes the first one to announce that good news, herself a stunning sign that a new order is on the way. Good news can be announced by anyone Jesus calls to do so, by any disciple and it does not matter where they fit on any social scale devised by others. The only requirement is her confession of her personal experience, "I have seen the Lord."

By the evening the message is wrapped in fear and locked doors. The political powers that put Jesus to death are still there and that makes them very afraid. For those behind the locked door the world order has not changed. The powers of banishment and death still govern their lives.

Then the risen Lord appears. Although 'Peace be with you' is a common greeting it is now shot through with explosive meaning. The new world order has begun. It is the same crucified One who now comes bearing the peace that God brings, which transforms fear into joy. The death dealing power has found its match and has done so in this very person, Jesus the Word made flesh.

Long ago the ancient story in Genesis recounts God breathed into the newly created humans and life burst forth. Now, it is happening again. Just as our ancient parents were given life to share it, enhance it, and make it be fruitful, so now.

The change happens in the story. Fear changes to rejoicing. Rejoicing is the outward sign of bursting with new life. The old is banished, the new has come. Of course, the old lurks in fear creating power and will forever stalk the disciples but joy, the fruit of the Spirit, will be their mark.

Just as in the old creation the Spirit is the force and driver of creation, so now. The new creation has its agents in the disciples who confess the risen Lord. Their creative power arises from the life of the Spirit of creation and their image is that of the crucified and risen Jesus; "As the Father has sent me so I send you." The disciples will be as the Word made flesh, the image of God's love to the world.

That may strike terror or despair in some hearts. It is such a high honour and thus a responsibility beyond our capacities. Read John 7.37-39 and see if you can find encouragement. The Holy Spirit turns the believer's trust in the Living Water into rivers of living water that flows to the world.

It flows to the world in the message of forgiveness. Forgiveness lies at the heart of all reconciliation. There is always a cost to forgiveness. If I lend all my savings in good faith to a friend in an immediate need who promises to return those savings and that borrower then cannot or will not repay it, I will be left destitute. I have been severely hurt and disadvantaged by the borrower's action so much so I am destitute. I have several choices open to me; I can go to court and seek redress so I don't need to consider forgiveness, I could simply write it off as though nothing had happened, but that would be colluding in a wrong rather than forgiveness and it would not restore the friendship. I choose to forgive them their debt as the Lord's Prayer says, "...forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Where is the cost in this? I think it must be with me. It is the pain of

destitution I will bear to have reconciliation and friendship again. In forgiveness I have given up my right to demand satisfaction or retributive punishment.

Of course, the other side to this is that the offending party must want the forgiveness offered. What happens if they refuse the offer? Even though the offer stands the debt remains and reconciliation remains unfinished business. The pain and hurt inflicted remains, the friendship in tatters.

The Word made flesh bears, in himself, the cost of forgiveness and reconciliation, the overcoming of death over life that humans have chosen.

Thus we come to the message the risen Lord gives to his disciples to untap the flow of living water. It is a word of forgiveness and thus the restoration of a loving fellowship in which the two identify with each other by making each other's needs his or her own. Forgiveness offered opens up all the possibilities that the living water offers.

Sometimes verse 23 is read as though I might be able to sit at the door of the church and dish out forgiveness to whomever I wish and withhold it from others. Institutionally it has been used to exert power and control in dangerous ways rather than become a fundamental step in freedom. Given some of the preceding discussion and John's description of the Spirit's role nothing could be further from the truth.

Forgiveness is not the end but the beginning; it opens the gates to new possibilities and it is always relational. Read John 16.7-11 and meditate on it. The Spirit's work will, through the disciples, offer fellowship that some will rejoice in, but the same message will also confront others who do not wish it. The very same message will offer freedom and the possibility, even probability of its rejection.

Thomas, like his brothers and sisters who did not believe Mary's testimony, won't believe theirs either. They go to Thomas with the same announcement as Mary, but he refuses it. He is in no way rebuked for that. In Thomas' case Jesus comes with the same message of peace. The relational is not solely communal but personal. Sometimes Thomas' doubt is held up as a virtue. Here it is neither a virtue nor a vice. It simply is. His confession, however, is crucial. This person is not just a fine example, a rabbi of great moral and legal thought, or prophet of great discernment. The creator is among us and a new age has begun. Now, Thomas needs witness to those who have not, and will not, see but who will believe like Thomas, that God is renewing the world.

### *Question*

Reflect for a time on "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." What might that look like for you?

By what authority do disciples go about their business? How does that control how we behave and what we say?

How much is joy a mark of your reconciliation and fellowship with God? How might a church live in joy?

What difference would joy make in mission?

What might a spirituality of joy look like (or not look like)?

We have come to the end of this week's readings. Bring together the thoughts you have had from listening and praying and thinking. Sit with and ask the Spirit where to go next with them.

Colin Dundon

Easter 2023

## FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

### STUDY TWO—THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

#### Acts 2.14a, 36-41

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

<sup>36</sup> Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah,\* this Jesus whom you crucified.’

<sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers,\* what should we do?’ <sup>38</sup> Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.’ <sup>40</sup> And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ <sup>41</sup> So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

This week we return to Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, jumping right to the end and noting its immediate effects. Peter’s long sermon which is worth reading (2.14-40), is a little summary of what early Christians thought was essential to the message that brings joy and life to the hearers. It was clearly centred on the life death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. So, it not a list of new debatable, philosophical ideas. It was not even about how good or bad Jesus’ teaching was, or if he was a good example of a human being. It was about key events and critical claims he made before he was crucified. Those key events and critical claims were about himself in relation to God’s purposes (God’s mission). Peter says that that Jesus made himself the axis of God’s mission.

That startling claim had to be backed up by God’s word revealed in the long, turbulent history of Israel, especially the prophets and the Psalms. We do not read that in our lectionary portions, but it was essential to the early Christians because it portrayed God’s enduring, loving struggle with recalcitrant humans who wanted nothing to do with His purposes if that purpose did not suit their desires.

The end of the argument is that Jesus, crucified, is Lord and Messiah. The title Lord refers to God’s majesty and right to rule the creation and Messiah describes the One who pursues and enacts God’s purpose (mission) to rule his whole magnificent creation in the way it was intended; lovingly, justly, and in fellowship with human beings.

#### *Question*

What does it mean to you that the Lord and Messiah is also the crucified?

What does it tell you about God’s mission and how it works?

Where does the authority for God’s mission come from?

What would be the spiritual resources we need to do mission in the way of the crucified?

Peter's hearers realise that they are not being asked to enter an armchair debate but, in the face of the serious argument, they need to do something to put matters right between God and themselves. After all, it is on these hearers' watch that the Lord and Messiah has been crucified. There is no blame nor hell-fire here for such an act, no desire for eternal vengeance, just the gracious, loving preaching of God's searching, prophetic word to bring them back home. Reconciliation and fellowship are the key.

The power of Peter's sermon is the Spirit. The Spirit speaks to human heart, raises the right question, and sends them searching for the answers to their question. It is all too easy to forget this in our work. This story is not about Peter's preaching power, his great rhetorical flare, or the hearers' ability or great desire to save themselves from the mess they are in. Simply, the Spirit stirs the mind and turns the heart.

The outward signs are repentance and baptism all into the ownership of Jesus Christ, where forgiveness and the Spirit have their home. In the end it all comes down to the story of what happened and what it means for God's purposes for the world. Repentance is often linked to doing penance for our sins, but it really means forgoing our desires and making Christ's desires our own. That is a whole other world. Baptism initiates us into that world along with others who long to do the same.

And it is for the whole world. Their generation was included whatever their hostility to this point in time, and their children to the end of the ages are included. God calls people to the crucified Messiah in the Spirit and word; they hear the word in the Spirit and the church is born.

### *Question*

How can we learn to hear and listen to the Spirit so we know the right questions to ask?

How has the central part of the story impacted your life? Could you share that with someone else?

The crucified Jesus as Messiah and Lord is the axis around which God's purposes spin. What spiritual resources do I need to keep me focussed on Him?

### **1 Peter 1.13-25**

<sup>13</sup> Therefore prepare your minds for action; <sup>14</sup> discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. <sup>15</sup> Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. <sup>16</sup> Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; <sup>17</sup> for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'

<sup>18</sup> If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. <sup>19</sup> You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, <sup>20</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. <sup>21</sup> He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. <sup>22</sup> Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.



<sup>22</sup> Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth\* so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply\* from the heart.\* <sup>23</sup> You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.\* <sup>24</sup> For

'All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,

and the flower falls,

<sup>25</sup> but the word of the Lord endures for ever.'

That word is the good news that was announced to you.

In last week's reading from 1 Peter, faith, joy, love and especially hope in the risen Christ were marks of the Christian. The sufferings of the present can be endured in that living hope.

The little word "Therefore" moves us from the past and future to the present. There are consequences to that hope, founded in the resurrection of Jesus, for the present time of turbulence, upset and change. Peter does not want to leave his hearers with the impression of a quiet life lived with at ease, meditating on the future heavenly inheritance. Real that future may be but disengaged from the present it is not.

The key to this passage is verses 15-16 so it introduces us to key theme; God's holiness and ours.

#### *Question*

In our world holiness means 'holier than thou' an attitude anathema to our society.

Reflect on ways that the word holy is used and some of its meaning both negative and positive. What do you think?

Verse 16 is a quote from Leviticus 19.2. In Leviticus and the prophets, holiness was the character of God. Sometimes it describes God's otherness from his created order as the Wholly Other. The prophet Hosea describes it this way; "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One is in your midst.' In the story of the call of Isaiah 6.1-7 best description is 'unapproachableness'. It is associated with the bright dazzling of glory, something that blinds even the eyes of the seraphim or angels that surround the throne in the vision of Isaiah. All these are attempts to explain in pictures and metaphors just how different God is and also how overwhelming that Presence is.

Human holiness is sometimes described as being separated to or consecrated to God. There is truth in that, but it does not seem to get to the core of the matter. Sometimes human holiness is identified with the fulfillment of a code of ethics. Again, there is truth in that, but again I think it unsatisfactory as a complete explanation.

Because God is Wholly Other, whose thoughts and ways are way beyond what we can imagine, human holiness is the disposition to seek those ways and know those thoughts for every situation in which they find themselves. Holiness is to fully engage in the personal relation offered in the cross, to grow into it overcoming the separateness as we grown into Christ.

Holiness as described here means that discernment of God's different ways becomes a way of living, being and responding in the world of human affairs. It is consecration, deeply ethical beyond our imaginations and embedded in the practice of discernment.

*Question*

How significant is discernment for our purposes in carrying out God's mission? Is discernment the place where spiritual life and mission meet?

If the central part of our life is the disposition to seek and know God's otherness in every situation of our world, how do we go about that business?

Let's start back at verse 13-14. Four significant disciplines are put forward. First is preparing the mind for action. The beautiful metaphor of girding up the loins, or tucking in skirts (ancient dress) into the belt to give freedom of movement and action for the work at hand, says it all. Well-equipped, flexible minds ready to work; that is the first requirement for discernment of the Wholly Other and holiness. Does that surprise you?

The second is the discipline of our attentiveness. The old translation was "be sober", with emphasis on alertness and steadiness of thought that will not allow ourselves to be distracted or get lost in a fog of mindlessness. Discernment and holiness are quickly drowned.

The third is to live in the hope of Jesus loving grace; really live it. It is a key to discernment. Peter will drive this home in this letter.

The fourth is to begin to live in our discernment of God's holiness (a whole other way of seeing things) by being obedient to our discernment. We can be easily swayed by past ways that were ignorant of God's way of seeing things (we have always done it this way).

So here are four disciplines that Peter proposes; flexible, well-equipped mind, critical attentiveness, letting hope in Christ drive us and obedient to our discernment.

*Question*

What do you make of these? Remember these were proposed for ordinary folk by and ordinary man in a trouble, agitated world. Peter is not talking to priests, theologians, or monks although they should take note!

If those are some disciplines, then what should our actions look like? That is the next part of the story that this passage pursues (14-23). Peter sets the motives and actions that are demanded by a life of living hope that discerns God's holiness.

The warp of the Christian life is made up obedience and holiness which we have already discussed. He adds the fear of God which not about terror as in a horror movie. If we are discerning God's holiness and perhaps discerning God's otherness in every way, it is unsettling to say the least, but it is a place of awe and wonder.

He finishes with the one discernment of holiness we share; the passionate love of each other. Verse 22 is one of the more urgent and passionate expressions of the demands that love of each other places on us. Humility must be our constant companion.

Why does the Christian life look like this?

God is holy. We have discussed this a little already. The consequence of this holiness is that God cares so much for his creation he judges all. The holy God treats human beings with

utmost respect and justice. They are agents of his care for the created order. There is no wink wink, or nudge nudge justice here. No collusion with wealthy or powerful. His creation means too much to him for that. We call this judge Father. An intimate name. A name that speaks of God's separateness and intimacy all at once.

God's holiness redeems us in the mystery of Christ's death and restores us in the power of the resurrection. That is something we could never have discerned because of god's otherness. Furthermore, this redemption is a new birth in which we share. Redemption is not a transaction that gets us into heaven. It places us in the very life of God now. We have the inestimable privilege of a new life that invites us to discern the very holiness of God.

### *Question*

This passage simple in its prose, but breathtaking in its theological and spiritual breadth, asks us to stop. Clearly, God's mission and the foundational spirituality in God's holiness will speak to each of us separately. How has this spoken to you? Are there issues you might need to address?

### **Luke 24.13-35**

<sup>13</sup> Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles\* from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup>and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup>While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup>but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad.\* <sup>18</sup>Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' <sup>19</sup>He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth,\* who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup>But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.\* Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. <sup>22</sup>Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup>and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. <sup>24</sup>Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' <sup>25</sup>Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Messiah\* should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' <sup>27</sup>Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

<sup>28</sup> As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup>But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup>When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us\* while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' <sup>33</sup>That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup>They were saying, 'The Lord has

risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' <sup>35</sup>Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Many years ago, an Australian film titled *Don's Party* portrayed a group of progressivist people seeing their progressivist political party lose resoundingly to a very conservative one in a general election. Devastation, grief, loss of hope, grounded in the numbing effects alcohol turned their party from expectation to disaster.

The walk to Emmaus has overtones of *Don's Party*. The talk, the sadness, the loss of their only hope all shattered by the empire and its colluding powers. So much had relied on this leader, one Jesus of Nazareth, who had shown all the signs of a great prophet and more. Indeed, it seemed as though God was with him in word and deed; even more, it looked like Israel's future hope was assured. It seemed God had returned in answer to their prayers and the great empire was facing its nemesis.

Jesus was as dead as the stone in which he was entombed. That they knew for certain and there was no coming back from that.

The great empire had instead cruelly won and all was shattered. Oh yes, some women went to the tomb to do the proper thing and spoke to some angels (of all things) who said he was alive. Some of the men went to check the story (as they should with hysterical women !!!) and, while the women's report of the empty tomb was correct, there was nothing else.

Who is this stranger who does not appear to have heard of this ruckus?

This is the *Don's Party* section of the story. What happens next takes them beyond anything they have ever known. It is the 'unknown, alternative finale' to *Don's Story*.

#### *Question*

Reflect on the differences between the women, and their encounter with the angels at the empty tomb, their faithful witness to the testimony given to them, and the incomprehension of the men. What might that tell us about the spirituality needed for discerning God's mission?

The stranger falls in beside them. Instead of displaying empathy and, being a good counsellor, he challenges them, rather brutally. He confronted the lack in discernment with a sharp and critical analysis of their underlying disposition.

They are foolish; ouch. Foolish here does not mean moronic or stupid as it might in modern colloquial English but obtuse, so they lack the sensitivity of mental alertness and acuteness. You might say that they have not listened all the while Jesus has been with them nor watched his 'performative teaching' of miracles, exorcism, and feedings all illustrating that the kingdom of God was at work. They had seen and heard the mission Dei but missed it entirely.

So, more education is not really the issue. Their need has to do more with the heart, and that requires more than re-education. They need to explore and reassess the commitments, dispositions, and attitudes that shape, condition and determine their way of life. They miss God at work in his mission, not because they didn't see or hear it but because they lacked the disposition, the discernment, to embrace the 'really real' as opposed to the 'perceived real'.

The 'perceived real' was that Jesus was well and truly dead. No amount of hearsay evidence from the mouths of women, (uncorroborated by males, to boot) about angels and empty tombs would persuade them. They thought he would be the Messiah of Jewish nationalist expectations who would redeem Israel from gentile colonialism and oppression. Somewhere in here, among the debris of failed politics, oppressive and thus misleading gender stereotypes, common sense certainties about death and who has the power over it, were their dispositions. But most all, who ruled the world? God or Rome?

To begin the change of perspective by exposing our blocking dispositions (by the way, this is what repentance means; a lot more than confessing trivial moral peccadilloes) he begins with God's story. We do not know what specific scriptures Jesus used here and that has properly created a great deal of speculation and academic debate. Perhaps the best way to gain a sense of scriptures used note the scriptures that the writers refer to as you read the New Testament. The most extensive quotes and exposition come from Isaiah and Psalms. But here it is the pattern of Moses and the prophets that matter; suffering and rejection and sometimes death is their destiny. The scripture story is the first point of re-orientation.

The centre of that story, the focal point was that it was necessary "that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory." Somehow, they missed that. The cross was not a cause for dejection but necessary for the liberation of the world. In his suffering and resurrection Jesus embodies the fulness of salvation that is, by the standards of the "perceived real", upside-down and inside-out. His death is the critical point of the divine-human struggle over how life was to be lived; in humility or self-glorification. He is rejected and put to death. People and politics exercise their ultimate to keep their dream of the 'percieved real' alive. God raises him up. Death is done. Politics cannot save us. It exercises the power of death.

Then they share a meal. They share each other's company. The exploration of discernment and mission is best done in shared company over a meal. Mission and spirituality are not individualistic endeavours (although they are deeply personal); they require the social cement of loving relationships.

Then comes the important part. The recognition of the risen Lord, the God who overturns 'perceived reality' as he breaks bread at the table. The Presence among. God among his people; the new Temple. They must come to this point each for themselves. Hearts burning with the scripture story are necessary, fellowship around the table in sharing 'our daily bread' is also necessary, but the recognition of the living Presence is essential to change everything.

In some circles this part of the story has created controversy. Is the meal just a meal in a motel dining room or really a reference to the Eucharist? I am going to suggest both and more.

'Give us today our daily bread', not simply because food is fuel but because it is also the centre of family and social life. Jesus spent many hours with disciples and friends 'breaking bread', sharing a meal to share a common life of journeying and conflict, a life of faith and fear, joy, and loss.

If we read the scriptures we discover that feasting is also part of the great banquet of the Messiah's people. It is an evocative parabolic metaphor of the great celebratory joy of the

loving fellowship of the kingdom. In that banquet the Presence is real beyond measure and it is that Presence from whom the joy and love flow.

Weekly we gather for the broken bread. Here the presence of the risen Lord is among us, not just within us. Here is the point of revelation week by week, the opening of our eyes to the 'really real'. In the ordinary everyday stuff of bread and wine the presence of the Triune God meets us and reveals under the 'perceived real' of the ordinary that which is 'really real'.

The departing Jesus leaves the disciples with no commission but what they have learned from this encounter is to articulate the reality of the divine presence in their midst, transforming them in the process. They return to Jerusalem and find the community, men and women, buzzing with excitement just as they are. They had left Jerusalem with hopes dampened and return bursting with joy. The Risen Lord is the centre of a new community as Simon has discovered for himself. The women were right all along. Their new creed is "The Lord is risen indeed...". They are witnesses to the great revelation.

### *Question*

Why did they miss what God was doing? If I read the story aright they saw what Jesus was about, so what created their lack of discernment?

I have illustrated some of their blocking dispositions. Can you see more? How do they speak to you?

What difference does an encounter with the Risen Christ make to these disciples?

What would be a central theme of the story of God's missional activity in our world? How can we witness to that?

Throughout these readings we have found hints about what helps and what hinders discernment in the Christian life and thus in mission. Bring them together and take time to reflect on how they might impact your life. What would your prayer be?

Colin Dundon

Easter 2023

## FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

### STUDY THREE—FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

#### Acts 2.42-47

<sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

<sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds\* to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home\* and ate their food with glad and generous\* hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

We come to the end of the Peter's sermon at Pentecost. The question is, So what? We examined last week how Peter answered their question, "what must we do?" The response of repentance, baptism into the name of Jesus and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. This seems like a response that must be deeply personal. And it is.

However, three thousand people personally responded in this way. Now what? Today's reading from Acts brings the story to its close. It results in a functioning community.

I sometimes wonder if we had written the story if we might have stopped at verse 41. The individual is all that there is. A short-term high is all that there is. Toss in a bit of celebrity surrounded by three thousand. That might well suit our times, but apparently not God's purposes for his Creation. God wants a people. Our readings today will reinforce that vision each in their own way. Individuals are necessary to God's purposes but they are not sufficient without others just like them. The story of Jesus and its world-transforming consequences find their focal point embodied in a community.

This community has four parts to its foundation that that are its source of strength, authority, guidance, and continuing witness, despite the headwinds that will certainly follow.

First, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. That teaching is quite complex. It includes the history and teaching of Jesus, his crucifixion for the forgiveness of sins and resurrection for our justification. It also includes expounding the story of God in the Old Testament and differentiating that teaching from the politics, cults and inherited religion that surrounded them. At the same time, they had to find points of contact in thought, culture, actions, and language in the surrounding menagerie of human life. That would develop throughout Acts but it is incipient here. The foundation of their life and mission was unrelenting, solid theological reflection and debate. Not conducted by an elite priesthood but by everyone. The leaders' job was to lead it in its continuing search in how to understand the revelation in Jesus, how to live and how to communicate it. The church is a creative, theological community, whose catalyst is mission.

The central authority was the risen Lord, ascended to his ruling position as the Lord of church and the creation. We are responsible for living truly under his loving and just rule, explaining that rule to ourselves and to others in our contexts.

Second, they lived in fellowship. We like the word tolerance in our world. It is vague, and has little responsibility attached to it. It amounts to warm feelings and a comfortable life without conflict.

This fellowship produced commonality of goods, selling off wealth to serve the needs of others. Signs and wonders witness to it just as it did in Jesus' day. The kingdom comes and overturns all the social, economic, and religious arrangements we make to keep each other at bay. That is what believing in the resurrection means in practice. It is not a theoretical proposition to be endlessly debated but a truth about the authority of Jesus to be lived out. The kingdom comes in unsettling, substantial and specific ways that goes beyond the bounds of safe and conventional friendship.

Some have read this part of the story as a model to be copied for all time; a type of Christian communism. Alternatively, others have dismissed it as an idealised and romanticised creation of the later church. The first has no evidence for it throughout the early period of Christianity including the story in Acts. The second is more a modern failure of Christian nerve lacking confidence that the resurrection faith is anything more than wishful thinking. These first believers had their social and political world turned upside down. They knew.

Third, this church engaged in the breaking of bread. We found the same thing on the road to Emmaus when Jesus met two mourning and lost disciples. We discussed there that the comprehensive way to think about this is to focus on the celebratory feast to which God calls us all, the great heavenly banquet when creation is restored and we rejoice (Luke 22.30).

In the present, then, we practice this weekly in the Eucharist. We share the great journey to the new creation with each other, sharing its joys and its burdens and sorrows. We also share our daily table, our daily bread with each other. Notice what Luke says, "They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts." Eating together is a sign of unity, solidarity, and deep friendship where contrived social barriers are broken down. When Jesus ate with sinners, he caused uproar in his world. He failed to make socially acceptable distinctions. In Luke the time of eating is a time of fellowship, revelation (think Emmaus again) and controversy. The resurrection turned things topsy-turvy again.

Fourth, prayers were central and critical. In this time, they attended the Temple to keep continuity with the story of God told by Israel and prayed the psalms in joy and lament. Praise was a notable element because they wished to commend what they had experienced in Jesus. It was worth talking about.

In this radical spiritual environment, bursting with the energy of the Holy Spirit people listened and paid attention with goodwill. Goodwill is a disposition of great significance. It opens up the possibilities of dialogue. It will not always be present.

#### *Question*

Several questions arise in this passage for spirituality and mission. What part can creative theological play? The spirituality described here is not some ethereal or enthusiastic outburst; it testifies to unsettling change. How might that help us form a missional spirituality?



The movement in this story challenges our emphasis on individual actors towards the true concern of the story – the community. How can we build a spirituality of community?

How might we enhance goodwill? What creates barriers to goodwill? How important might it be as a missiological category?

### 1 Peter 2.1-10

<sup>2</sup>Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. <sup>2</sup>Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— <sup>3</sup>if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

<sup>4</sup> Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and <sup>5</sup>like living stones, let yourselves be built\* into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup>For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious;  
and whoever believes in him\* will not be put to shame.'

<sup>7</sup>To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,  
'The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the very head of the corner',

<sup>8</sup>and  
'A stone that makes them stumble,  
and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,\* in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

<sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

Peter turns from the discussion on salvation and holiness we discussed in the last study to explore how that might work out in the community. He does that in two ways; by pointing out problems they may have brought to the community's table from their past and the turns to what their true status is.

He tells them to leave their old muddy shoes outside the door (2.1-3). When we baptised in the rivers and ponds people would line up on one side in their old clothes, plunge into the water to be baptised and leave the water, discreetly changing into new clothes out of their old. The old was no more. The new was here.

The list of 'old clothes is hideously grimy. They are all the products of self-interested power and corrosive of all community. Malice is conscious desire to harm someone. Guile is everything that is not straightforward, full of devious means and crooked ways of dealing with people. Hypocrisy we hate but, if we can get away with it, so much the better; hiding our real motives behind our outer respectability and apparent sincerity. Envy troubled the

early church as much as it does us. Resentment is a powerful and destructive habit. Slander destroys others ruthlessly and deliberately.

The community lives by trust and mutuality. It cannot survive any of the above. In the church today we worry about all sorts of things but rarely about these. Yet they are high on Peter's agenda. We brush them off as personal peccadilloes but Peter sees them (and not sexuality) as utterly destructive of everything the gospel stands for; destructive of mission and corrosive of spiritual life.

So, he recommends wiping them off our shoes. Instead, being freshly born into a fresh new world we need to get used to the food this new world offers. Peter calls this spiritual milk although the word associated with spirit is not used here. It is more associated with word and reason. I usually think of this as in 1.25 "the word of the Lord endures forever." True spiritual growth arises from "tasting that the Lord is good". The living Word nourishes us through the enduring word so we can grow in salvation. Note that salvation is a dimension we grow into. We don't own it all at once. We grow.

Peter turns to the question, what is this church? Is it just an afterthought? Is it a functional response to the success of Christian preaching? Is it an interesting sociological phenomenon? The answer to those is no. There is another way of looking at this body that frames it another way entirely.

That framework comes from the story of Israel and its scriptures using Psalm 118.22; Isaiah 8.14 and 28.16.

The church does not begin its institutional life, which is where we tend to begin today. It begins with us come to the Living Stone; finding solidity and life in the risen Christ. Rejected for sure, but in God's sight precious. Our share in this Living Stone is to become living stones ourselves, shaped by the Living Stone, into his house. This spiritual house is packed with living stones acting as priests, offering sacrifices in the shape of their whole life. This is God's new house, God's new priesthood offering sacrifices of transformed lives nurtured by the Living Stone. The one thing precious is the Living Stone.

From that the nature of the church is shaped by God's history with His people. Remember we studied the idea of chosen or elect in Study One. Its central core is calling to fulfill God's purposes for creation.

The priesthood belongs to all as does royalty. Obviously, we are in the realm of metaphor here. As living stones we share the status of the Living Stone. We share his royalty, his priesthood, his holiness, and his living relation with God.

We have one purpose; to let the world know God's mighty acts in Jesus the Messiah that lead folk from the darkness of absence into the light of loving fellowship. Because of our new status the calling and responsibility belongs to us all. All our life together must serve this end.

*A little note.*

Verse 8b is a little reminder of the mystery of unbelief. Why would anyone turn down God's good gift of loving fellowship as described in the gospel? We might answer, God hardened their hearts or, they hardened their own hearts. Today, our preference would be to use the language of choice; their choice, their problem. That sounds plausible to us in our culture. After all, God has no interest in what we do, much less

get involved. I think that this a rather heartless point of view. We can shrug and walk away. But what if there is a hidden, complex relationship happening between the person refusing the offer and God, one that we cannot even comprehend.

The language Peter uses comes from the ancient story tellers and prophets in scripture. The best illustration is the conflict between Pharoah and God in Exodus that results in the plagues. God hardens, Pharoah hardens. We are caught on the horns of a paradox. The language here highlights that.

This is more than a puzzle; a jigsaw is a puzzle and a little observation and thought can figure it out. A mystery is a journey into paradox without any guarantee that we can resolve it. The only resources we have are own experiences of God's will and our will and the witness of others. Often our spiritual life is like the man's who said to Jesus in utter desperation over his son's plight, 'I believe, help my unbelief'. That is the mystery of our own unbelief.

This verse is not a proof text for double predestination. In its context it is a reminder of the complexity of human interactions with other wills, especially God's active participation. These are areas we need to live through together theologically and spiritually.

#### *Question*

How can we develop patterns that will help us grow spiritually? How can this help us rid ourselves of the muck we have dragged with us into the community?

How might our new status in Christ help us build foundations for a spiritual life that is not solely concerned with ourselves?

How might the very clear statement of the calling of the church help us to assess our present institutional life?

#### **John 10.1-10**

<sup>10</sup>Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup> So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The little parable that begins the Gospel begins a well-known part of John's Gospel in which Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd. Images of sheep and shepherds dominate this teaching which ends in the ominous rejection of Jesus on the grounds that he has a demon.

Jesus begins with a riddle, proverb, or parable about sheep and sheep pens, thieves and robbers and gatekeepers. This little story points in many directions and Jesus picks up some of those as he speaks.

The sheep are in a pen which indicates that someone owns them and has invested in protecting them, a wise business decision. Thus, it is easy to tell the difference between who the owners or agents of the owners are and thieves. The gate is key. Their actions betray them; which one uses the entrance?

Further, the sheep know the owner's voice. In fact, each sheep has a name and they know it and the shepherd knows each one's name. Strangers can't get the sheep to willingly follow because they do not know the voice. It is the deep personal connection of years spent valuing each sheep. The thief will have to use some form of coercion to force them to follow.

For one, the sheep are a product to be bought and sold, good only for making money. For the other, they are animals of great value in themselves which the owner sees of individual worth.

No wonder they didn't have a clue what he was talking about. This obscure pastoral idyll seems hardly worth the time to think about. As with much that Jesus says it might be unwise to write him off as a pastoral romantic.

The saying 'I am the gate for the sheep' sharpens from romantic pastoral idyll to a knife edge of differentiation and critique.

His naming himself 'I am he' has already occurred in John 4 in his conversation with the Samaritan woman. It is a direct reference to God's name revealed to Israel through Moses. It is God's covenant name that promises liberation and lasting relationship with Israel. It is a confronting use by Jesus that challenges everything of the culture around him. To them, that could not be. His claim is ridiculous.

Now he adds a qualifier to 'I am he' which tells us something significant about 'I am.' 'I am the gate for the sheep'. This directly and openly challenges the political and religious leadership of his time, especially in Jerusalem. It might not seem clear to us but the logic of the story is now revealed. The gate is the only valid point of entrance. There is only one gate and he is it. This is an exclusive claim, first of all, about how the sheep enter. If he is the gate then he is the exclusive point of entry. Later on, he would say 'I am the way...'. Not one way but the only way? 'I am the gate' states the same proposition.

I think that in modern Christianity this is quite a challenge. It has always been a challenge and the history of Christian thinking is one long battle over what this means. To our modern ears, tuned to the relativism of all religious beliefs, this is a serious challenge.

Jesus claims exclusive rights to the sheep. He knows them. To them they are not marketable products but each a life who need to find life and pasture and they find it in him. The thief will seek the sheep only for their value to him. Thieves govern God's covenant people. Can it more confronting?

This also reveals the covert political themes buried here. They will come out when Jesus declares himself to be the good shepherd just as God is (Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34) and as great kings might be. The good shepherd is not a bucolic pastoral image but a direct challenge the political status quo of his day.

*Question*

How can a spirituality that takes 'I am the gate' seriously impact on our view of our calling in the world?

Again, if we take the 'I am' seriously how do we go about our calling in a world that is hostile to such notions?

To approach this another way, should we drop the idea that Jesus is the 'I am'? Would that solve our problem? By the way, which is?

'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. What would a spirituality that encompasses this statement of Jesus' purpose look like? How might it help us structure our mission calling?

At the end of each of the studies I am going to mention some of the BIG QUESTIONS we will have to discuss as we go about the daily business of living our lives in the Presence of the risen One.

## THEOLOGY

We noted how seriously the early church paid attention to theology. I will leave you with a couple of quotes from a Dutch theologian A van de Beek to think about.

"Theology...attempts critically to review the assertions Christians make. They are tested in the light of the real actions of God. For Christians do not make their assertions at random; they are of the opinion that in making them they are doing justice to God; they believe they are correctly saying that God is as they say."

He then goes on, "No theology is perfect. We are always looking for a better model."

Colin Dundon

Easter 2023

## FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

### STUDY FOUR—FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

#### Acts 7.55-60

<sup>55</sup>But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' <sup>57</sup>But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup>Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' <sup>60</sup>Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

Stephen was a deacon in the Jerusalem church. His story is found in Acts 6-7. He was a Jewish convert to the nascent faith of the risen Jesus. He was a brilliant theologian and public advocate and his capacity to carry out a public debate and draw attention to his arguments for his case was exceptional. He irritated many of his opponents and finally angered some very significant enemies. They brought a case against him. They alleged that he attacked the law of Moses and the Temple, two of the religio-political foundations of the Temple politics of his day. And he did this all in the name of Jesus.

In his defence he refuses to become defensive but outlines, through Israel's history and prophets, his positive case for Jesus as the consummation of Israel's revelation. In the process he attacks his accusers' unbelief and failure to keep covenant with God. He rejected their belief that the Temple was the focus of revelation of God's love. That came alone in Jesus. In all of this he stood in the line of Moses and the prophets and argued his case with great learning from the sources that Jewish held dear.

This where our little portion begins, with their angry and frustrated reaction. They have nothing against him that can stick.

Stephen seals his own fate with his visionary declaration. The church had witnessed Jesus' ascension but now Stephen witnesses to the true theological significance of that event that was originally confined to disciples.

That declaration of the public nature of the Lordship of Jesus is Spirit-inspired. The Spirit does not tell Stephen to do something new or wonderful. He does not reveal a program for navigating mission. In a hostile environment the Spirit reveals the 'really real'. Jesus stands in the position of authority at the centre of the glory of God. It is that vision with which the world must deal.

Now the 'really real' is public knowledge and highly charged and no longer a private, in-house matter. Jesus rules. The political and religious elites do like that affirmation. Religion is out of the private world and into the public. That is the Spirit's witness.

The confession, 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God!' is the death knell. This Jesus is now the exalted Lord who must be obeyed and to reject is perilous. This the core of the speech and the early church's witness.

Stephen is taken out by a lynch mob and stoned. For the political elite this is plausible deniability; it was out of their hands (remember Pilate).

In our western world only the insane or the gullible die for what they believe to be true. Or maybe a crazed fanatic. Not person who is sane, who can conduct a high-level public defence of his belief, who does not tote a gun, but asks that others be forgiven at the point of giving over his precious life to his Lord and God.

Other members of the early church would soon face the same dilemma. The excerpt should have taken in the next ominous line, "And Saul approved of their killing him." The Scourge stands by, waiting in the wings while the mob do his work. That very day the purge starts (8.1-3).

### *Question*

Reflect on the question that lies behind this little excerpt from Acts; What is worth living and dying for?

In our polite, civil, mentally balanced religion do we believe to be true any longer that risen Lord rules? What might it mean for us to live with the uncomfortable Spirit in our midst?

What is the difference between crazed fanaticism and believing something to be true, true enough die for? Reflect on the fact that, across the world, our brothers and sisters face that question each day. We do not.

Reflect on the idea that the Gospel can very uncomfortable (a negative in our culture). What would a spirituality look like that helps us with this?

What is the core of our identity?

### **1 Peter 2.11-25**

<sup>11</sup> Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. <sup>12</sup>Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

<sup>13</sup> For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, <sup>14</sup>or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. <sup>15</sup>For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. <sup>16</sup>As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. <sup>17</sup>Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor.

<sup>18</sup> Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. <sup>19</sup>For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup>If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. <sup>21</sup>For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

<sup>22</sup> 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

<sup>23</sup>When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. <sup>24</sup>He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness;

by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup>For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Oh dear, I am glad I am not preaching this coming week. What would I do with this passage? Here is the very worst of Christianity; theological support for slavery, the oppression of women (women and men are discussed in chapter 3) and the tyranny of the state. What more needs be said? Can we tear the page(s) out?

The trouble is that we are, quite properly, reading this text (and others like it) through the lens of recent Christian history, even up to the present day in some cases. Has the history of the use of the text created such a deadly cancerous growth that it might be better to lay it to rest? I thought seriously about that. Many of my friends have decided that is their course of action. Leave it to wither and die and, instead, turn to work for justice for slaves, domestic violence victims, and those oppressed by the tyranny of the state.

I am very tempted to follow their advice because the work they suggest is critical to neighbourly justice and love. It is a significant element of a Christian missional statement. But, foolishly perhaps, I want to try one last time to sight any flickering life that might be found here. To put this another way, we have interrogated this passage, it's time to see if it has enough life to interrogate us.

Peter wants to move his readers from a discussion of their wonderful gifted status as the people of God, and the vocation of divine purpose they now participate in. We studied that last week. He wants to move their thoughts now on to how to live this gift in the life they now live in a far corner of the mighty Roman Empire in the middle part of the first century CE. Status and calling has to be made to work in their life, in their time, in their society as it is.

So, verses 11-12 set the discussion up. They are beloved. That is the key term because it is God's designation of them as called in Christ. He is the beloved; they are the beloved. That is the 'really real' situation.

However, they live work and breathe in an historical, social, and political context that paints another picture of reality. There they are aliens and exiles. I lived for many years in another country which required me to carry, wherever I went, a pass titled ALIEN. Nothing said it more. I did not belong. My home was elsewhere; even, at least officially, I was not welcome. That is the picture Peter is painting. The Christian's calling, loyalty and desires belong elsewhere. The desires of the soul, the inner life, are the risen Lord and his calling, the desires of the flesh are the forces that turn people in on themselves, away from the neighbour and away from God.

Their task was to continue to live honourable and exemplary lives. That was the single greatest witness to the core of their being in Jesus.

We see a little of their world, in that they were maligned as evil-doers. That can be seen from Roman authors who saw them superstitious and full of vices and worse. We see today what the stress of undeserved and unrestricted slander can do to people when they receive abuse of every vile kind. That was common for Christians in the Roman Empire. It was their context. The only tool they had was their behaviour in loving the neighbour. That was their hope and tool of mission so that when God came to rule that may be of blessing to some. Note, there is no romantic note here or guarantee of a quiet life; just the quiet confidence that God will come to restore his world.



What might it mean to conduct oneself honourably before one's fellow participants in Roman society? Peter now turns to that and starts with the largest element of Roman life, all-pervasive government, then moves to the greatest economic underpinning force of slavery. In 3.1-7 he moves on to households where most other activities are conducted. He is covering the whole Roman society of politics, economics, and societal interaction.

Peter is saying to us, his present readers, don't do me the disservice of thinking that I am addressing you as though you are the only ones that matter. What matters is how you live a Christ life in your politics and your economics and your perilous societal interactions. I am addressing Roman society. (I said that, of course, and I hope you can see the point.)

Furthermore, he continues, for those who think you can just lift my words here and turn them into some kind of command that you can check off your list for being good, think again. This is work, daily growth.

Peter then states his topic: Be subject to every human for the Lord's sake. I have chosen this translation because the NRSV disguises the offensive word 'be subject' and I have omitted the word institutions which does not appear in the Greek text.

Obviously, be subject cannot mean simply obey. That would be absurd (and it is ruled out by Ephesians 5.21). This little phrase signifies a fundamental aspect of the Christian life. It is the voluntary subordination of oneself to others, putting the interests and welfare of others above one's own, preferring to give rather than receive, to serve rather than to be served. During Lent we studied Philippians 2.1-11. Remember the words, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..."

The opposite is selfish ambition or conceit, the desire to assert ourselves above others attempting to exploit others for our own self-aggrandisement.

This is an attempt to articulate a crucified Christ ethic in an Empire that obsessed over power and control and order and used military force to that end. It is not revolutionary in the sense of armed rebellion, but a tiny movement made up of free men and women who have thrown off the shackles of fear and work for goodness and rightness in all relationships. The only person feared is God.

The same ethic applies to slaves. There is much known now about slavery in the Roman empire and it is important not to confuse it with colonial slavery in America and the Caribbean for instance. But it was still slavery and harshness was part of the use of power. The system would not be changed by slave revolts. The results were obvious. That was not the way injustice would be resolved. So, once again, it is free people who, under suffering, redefine the situation because they have redefined themselves in Christ.

If you want to see this worked out in a more personal way read Philemon very carefully for Paul's development of these ideas.

Peter finishes this section with a theological reflection on Isaiah 53. His point is plain. Christ's suffering proved redemptive, setting others free and bringing healing. All Christian life comes back to this point of reference. That may be our biggest challenge. There are no dot points we can follow, just the crucified Christ and work out day by day how to do it.

Peter's ethic and Paul's has come under criticism from moderns for not tackling the injustice and cruelty of slavery. It is true there is no criticism of slavery in the New Testament. There are many reasons for this not the least they knew of no other way of ordering society. But the authors of the New Testament did not accept the Roman order as a virtuous expression of the Divine will. They regarded it as a sign of the Fall thus they show ambivalence towards it. Humans needed order and government should provide that and, if they punished evil and rewarded good, that was a bonus. They had no way of challenging and changing the system any more that Uyghurs do today. They would undermine it by living differently in a pattern created by their crucified Lord. Change Who defines who human beings are and change human relationships into the pattern of Christ; this became their goal.

We live in a democratic society with much more freedom to express our views and act for change. For that we need to be grateful. I certainly am. However, the old problems are still there in the political, economic, and social realms of our life; the desire of many to assert themselves at the expense of others and attempt to exploit others for their own self-aggrandisement. Some governments support such activities. Thankfully, others don't but we still need careful monitoring by regulating agencies. We now have access to a much wider range of options. That is worth a study in its own right, especially for people who want to pursue Christ's mission.

#### *Question*

Is it even possible to live our life in our world with an ethic of the crucified Christ? We need to talk about this much more than we do.

The New Testament does not offer political, economic, or social solutions. It calls restored, free people to live as the crucified Christ. What would a spirituality look like that would support that idea?

What is the missiological significance of the ethic?

Given our greater access to political and economic power how can we live the freedom in Christ for the good of all?

#### **John 14.1-14**

<sup>14</sup>'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.' <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

<sup>8</sup> Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me

because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

A person's last words are treasured by friends and families. In John's Gospel we now turn to Jesus' last words and we will read them in church up until Pentecost. He wants his disciples to know that his leaving them and even the crucifixion is not cause for despair. There will be suffering and grief in the short term, but a whole new adventure will open before them, living as witnesses to the abiding presence of Jesus in the life of the Spirit.

We use this passage in the funeral services because of the future references in the text and that can mask what this last testament of Jesus is about. Jesus is speaking primarily about the present. The reference to the future is put hope into the present. The present for him is the path to the cross. The present for the disciples is one of confusion, alarm, and failing trust in Jesus' promises; who wants to be associated with a doomed man.

This interpretation of John 14 makes this passage a great study for missional spirituality. In our day many Christians have lost confidence in the promises as they have become embodied in institutional Christianity, and feel confusion and alarm as their known world of inherited western Christianity erodes before their eyes. Jesus spoke to his disciples in a different situation but one in which there seemed no hope.

Why shouldn't their hearts be troubled? I think Jesus takes three approaches to answer the question or giving reasons as to why he can call them to face the future without him present, yet without anxiety and living lives of trust.

The first answer is found in verses 1-6. The basis of the answer is the metaphor of the Father's house. This is common in John and, unfortunately for all the sermons I have heard preached at funerals, does not refer to a geographical location in heaven (which John does not mention). It is a picture of the closeness of the indwelling of the Son and the Father from the beginning. It is relational, a place of intimacy and safety. His cross, resurrection and ascension is the preparation for their life in that intimacy. He will, when all is done, bring them home. He has told them the way he will tread toward that goal (chapter 13). It is his way home and they cannot follow him on it. At least, not yet.

Thomas has not yet comprehended the way of the cross and Jesus' words puzzle him. It is then that Jesus offers another 'I am' saying. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Someone has described these words as the high point of Johannine theology. The coming of the Word made flesh has changed everything but most especially the relationship between God and humanity. In the encounter with the crucified Jesus the Father reveals his own way of salvation, its truth and the abundant life that flows from it.

*Note:*

These words of Jesus, that open us up to the intimacy of the Father, have been weaponised by some Christians to bludgeon theological opponents into submission and exclude others. They have been made the cornerstone of Christian triumphalism. It is obvious from the ancient context that was not their intention. However, we do need to raise a BIG QUESTION about religions and I will do that in another study. We need to theologically explore how we

can praise and rejoice in the creator's incarnation in Jesus for the salvation of the creation and not use it to destroy others.

The second answer is found in verses 8-11. From his request it is clear that Philip has not yet quite grasped the meaning of the Word made flesh. The intimacy of the Father and Son in life and purpose is revealed in Philip's Lord. The answer that Jesus gives to Philip is critical to the mission on which he sends them. It is that they must trust as revealing the truth. It is not a speculation but a way that leads to life. It is this that is our 'home' even in the present, life in the Father and the Son.

The third answer is in verses 12-14. He tells them that you will continue my work which are God's works. Sharing in Jesus' works then, is sharing in the revealing of God to the world. That is their sole purpose as it was Jesus'.

To that end prayer will be their one means. In prayer the disciples enter into the relationship of Father and Son so that they can share in the witness to the revealing of God's love for the world in Jesus. Given the way this verse has been abused notice that the promise is made in the context of the disciples' mission to witness. They will need all the life they can draw on. That is promised to them.

#### *Question*

Record how this portion of the last testament of Jesus has helped you or not, as the case maybe. What remains unanswered? How has it helped? Write them down. Sit with them in prayer. Do you have a place to talk about them?

Once again in our journey we find Jesus as the central figure in discussions about our mission and spirituality. If Jesus is the touchstone, the life, the goal, how will that shape our mission and our spiritual life?

God promises us that if we use the one simple means of prayer then the life of God opens up to us. How can we make this a central part of our spiritual lives?

#### **BIG QUESTION; POLITICS**

Politics and economics are critical parts of our cultural context in which the good news comes to others. Christianity, like Islam for instance, has a political history and carries political baggage, but, unlike Islam, has no formulated political theory. The central claim of Christians that Jesus is Lord is politically charged and thus has a public claim. Jesus cannot be privatised. Because we have no common agreement about what this means in our world, where religious involvement is discouraged and disparaged, we need to talk about how we live with Jesus as our Lord and the Lord of the creation in a democratic society, in which we have every right (even an obligation) to participate.

Colin Dundon

Easter 2023

## FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

### STUDY FIVE—SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

#### Acts 17.22-31

<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup>For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup>The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup>nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup>From one ancestor\* he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup>so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup>For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

<sup>29</sup>Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup>While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup>because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

This week’s reading moves us on in the story from the very earliest days of the church’s mission under the Spirit to a much later time. Paul is now not a persecutor but a leading preacher and apostle. The city is not Jerusalem but Athens. The church is no longer made up of Jewish Christians but is multicultural, with all the problems that would bring. More than 20 years after Stephen’s death everything has changed.

The passage we read today has no context so I have included Acts 17.16-21 to help us as we approach this looking for some insights into mission and spirituality.

#### Acts 17.16-21

<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup>So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place\* every day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup>Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) <sup>19</sup>So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup>It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ <sup>21</sup>Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Paul is encountering cultured paganism of his day in his time in Athens and it is instructive for us to see how he does it. Paul has stirred up trouble in Thessalonica and they in turn

have stirred further trouble in Beroea. Paul has taken advice and to Athens to wait for Timothy and Silas who are cleaning up in Beroea and establishing the new congregation.

Paul sets out to do his business as an apostle and talks to people. He is not averse to public, no doubt robust, debate. He starts in the synagogue first because in the early church the mission went to the Jew first, as God's ancient people. Then he moves between sabbaths to the market place. The Gospel is best argued and tested in public spaces, as far as he is concerned. Anyone who wanted to engage was welcome.

Paul is in the city of ancient intellectual elites. Athens had once been the centre of the ancient intellectual life but it was now in a period of decline. It was a free city and had a famous university but it was probably best described as living on its reputation. Paul found himself irritated by the city's strange mix of idolatry and superstition and intellectual debate. That is not uncommon in our day.

In the market place he met with two potent philosophical forces of the time; Epicureanism and Stoicism. What makes this so interesting is that they are both still with us. Epicureanism took its name from its founder Epicurus (341-270 BCE) and tended to be materialistic in outlook. They believed that either the gods did not exist, or they were so far removed from the world and remote from its concerns that they had no interest in it and exercised no influence. They taught a rudimentary atomic theory, and their ethics emphasised the importance of pleasure and tranquillity. They were not sensualists as they are often portrayed today. Their view of pleasure scorned sensualism.

Zeno (340-265 BCE) founded Stoicism, the name coming from the place where he taught. Reason was the first principle and it was inherent in the structuring of the universe. That was an expression of their view that God and the universe were one as an expression of Gods' nature as world-soul.

These folk dismissed Paul as a babbler, or seed-picker, describing a bird picking up bits and pieces from here and there, a purveyor of mere scraps of learning. It was a robust debate. They took him to be peddling foreign deities (anything from Palestine and the East was definitely foreign). They thought Paul was peddling Jesus and his consort 'resurrection' which in Greek is feminine, and today is Anastasia. Understandable.

That opens up the public debate even further. At this point our reading begins. Paul presents himself before the scholars (who could also act as judges) and puts his case. He not on trial, but his ideas do trouble the status quo.

Inn the speech Paul puts three standard Christian ideas out for a hearing and perhaps a debate. Remember this speech is a summary so Luke has put his stamp on it as ancient historians did, to emphasise what they considered to be the main points.

He begins with an attention-grabbing gambit. He finds them very religious. In fact, so much so that just in case there is the altar to the unknown God. It is just the fact that gives him the move he needs.

First, it leads him to the God who made the world, the Lord of heaven and earth. A standard Jewish claim, and the first article of the creed. That means God is not trapped in shrines nor in need of human assistance or supply. He is the source of life.

Second, Human beings are God's because of their creation. It is what binds them together. They need God because their life comes from him and is dependent on him and living is for

searching God out. God is always searching them out. Paul then gives the essence of the thoughts of a couple of the poets to back up his thesis. The sources are hard to ascertain with precision.

Third on the basis that humans are God's offspring Paul draws the conclusion that idolatry is a fruitless exercise. If humans are like God, then it is clear that an inanimate object cannot portray the living God.

Paul then becomes the preacher and calls attention to the fact that, if what he says is true, then there are consequences to such a truth. Ignorance in the past may be overlooked but to ignore the truth is bordering on dangerous. God's judgement, the resurrection of Jesus call people to have a complete change of heart and framework of thinking. And seeing the world.

So what do we make of all this?

This is not a one-size-fits-all pattern for mission. Very few are as well-trained and equipped as Paul. We are not full-time mission workers. We live and work to care for our families and live our lives. It would be very unwise to view this story as setting us a standard to which we must conform. The call to us is more like: we live in a situation not unlike this, where even some variation of the same old philosophies haunt the corridors of intellectual life and shape our cultural life. We can't be Paul and shouldn't be, but we might pick up few ideas to toss around. That might help us.

First, know what is going on around us. What ideas drive our society and its desires, and what rituals do we use to support and reinforce such ideas because that is what drives us and our neighbours. We do not to have all the answers but we need to be in the ballpark with the other players and understand the rules by which the game is being played now.

Second, know basic Christian theology and have confidence in it. Did Jesus rise from the dead and now is Lord of the cosmos? A crazy idea, I know, but central to Christian proclamation and work. If we don't have confidence in that then give the whole thing a miss, and walk away. As Paul says on this subject, "we are of all people most to be pitied." The epicureans and stoics are most likely right.

Third, prepare ourselves for honest and public debate. It won't always be successful, just as Paul only had moderate success, but a church came into being and some people wanted to continue the dialogue.

Fourth, take courage, as Paul did, that human beings are God's offspring and that their desires to find meaning, happiness, and security are part of a long human search that God encourages and inspires.

### *Question*

Can you spot some more ideas that might be helpful in our conduct of our calling in our world?

#### **1 Peter 3.8-22**

<sup>8</sup> Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. <sup>9</sup>Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. <sup>10</sup>For

'Those who desire life

and desire to see good days,  
 let them keep their tongues from evil  
 and their lips from speaking deceit;  
<sup>11</sup> let them turn away from evil and do good;  
 let them seek peace and pursue it.  
<sup>12</sup> For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,  
 and his ears are open to their prayer.  
 But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.'

<sup>13</sup> Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? <sup>14</sup>But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear,\* and do not be intimidated, <sup>15</sup>but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; <sup>16</sup>yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup>For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. <sup>18</sup>For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup>in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup>who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup>And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup>who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

As we have seen already in the letter, Peter conceives the practical life of Christians as relational, just the life with God is relational. Christian ethics is more about how Christians conceive their agency in relationships and live out their lives as servants of the crucified one. We discussed that in the last study at some length. Our lives are not so much about ticking off a code as learning how to treat the other as the crucified Christ would. It is a journey in which we learn to take back and reshape our agency under the gentle tutelage of the Jesus and the Spirit. It is a lifelong journey.

He now concerns himself with the relational life of the congregation in verses 8-12. Carefully read these verses and pray with them. They are his summary of congregational life under the cross. Verses 10-12 quote Psalm 34:13-17 to demonstrate that this has always been God's way.

The virtues of verse eight are all relational and common across the New Testament writings. They are not just commands to do something but descriptions of how congregations are shaped and formed. Perhaps the notion of a humble mind needs some definition as it will enhance all the other virtues. John Dickson gives a definition that I have found helpful,

*Humility is the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself.* He adds, more simply a humble person is marked by a *willingness to hold power in the service of others.*

That results in a non-retaliatory relationship with others. All we wish to give is blessing.

*Note*



This study and the last will, no doubt, have raised questions for some in its recommendation of non-retaliation in the face of evil. I have discussed the meaning of the texts but now we must face the fact that some Christians who have been the victims of abuse and oppression have found themselves further oppressed by being told to submit to their abuse. And the oppressor has played on that piety. It is easy for those of us who are relatively powerful in society to exhort the poor and powerless to non-retaliation.

I want to draw a distinction between non-retaliation and non-resistance. Think Christ, think Ghandhi, think Martin Luther King Jr. All of them showed risky, active, faith. Christians must actively resist evil in the form of violence and oppression given the tools available to us in democratic societies.

That is why Peter wants congregations to be safe spaces. They would be havens for slaves, women, and wives. In the ancient world Roman society dictated that all slaves and women follow the religious allegiance of the head of household. Peter urges non-retaliation, but not non-resistance. The channels for resistance for our long-departed ancestors were few, if any at all. Their resistance was to take their agency back. And, by the way, that is still the first necessary step today. We can back that up with help from social and legal agencies. They could not. The crucified Christ and the resurrection were all they had. And the congregation which was sympathetic, loving, tender hearted, and of a humble mind.

Without doubt this requires more dialogue but that should be part of our ongoing missional discussion.

In verses 13-17 Peter continues to discuss the issue of suffering unjustly. Christian's resistance is doing good, living in a way that seeks to put things to rights. In a just society that should be welcome but often it is not. Nasty things can happen to good people.

So, Peter says be prepared to resist in another way. Be ready to explain why you do what you in the name of the one who was crucified. It requires us to be very clear about our hope, and be able to explain it. Also be able to explain how that connects to your behaviour. We are not secularists who think that we alone can perfect the world.

But that explanation must be based on a clear conscience and done in gentleness and respect. The crucified Christ must impact our whole life, not just our intellect. Intellect without conscience, gentleness and respect is barren, naked power.

Once again Peter returns to Christ's death to explore suffering for doing good. He gives us passage that is so full of obscurity (for us, so long after) it is hard to know what to make of it. And the scholarship is immense.

So, just a couple of comments. The main theme is the triumph of Easter. That triumph extends even to those who tried to overcome Noah and thus destroy the world and who are now 'in prison'. Christ's preaching his victory over them means that the salvation he offers cannot be overturned. The world will be saved, despite their efforts. Christ's victory over them raises the flag of victory over those who persecute those pursue Christ's love in the world.

That is about the best I can do in this space. Verse 22 is the key conclusion and it is common in the New Testament. Christ rules and the whole of creation is subject to him. That remains the core of mission theology and the spiritual life of the church.

### *Question*

How can we work towards a spirituality that would help us take back and reshape our agency under the cross, for the good of all?

What can a functioning congregational life, as described by Peter, contribute to our mission?

How important is congregation as 'safe space' for mission?

### **John 14.15-21**

<sup>15</sup> 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup>And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. <sup>17</sup>This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

<sup>18</sup> 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup>In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup>On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup>They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

We continue our short journey through Jesus' last night with his disciples. Last week we noted the consternation of the disciples about the 'way' Jesus was going and where it would lead him and them. There were strong hints that his departure was for good. That issue is addressed in today's reading.

The theme of Jesus' departure remains central to this passage. This departure will not lead to lostness but a new experience; the gift of the Spirit.

The Spirit is called the Paraclete and that is a word that is loaded with connotations. One prominent use is that of an advocate or a defending counsel. At root the word, in its verbal form, signifies 'to call alongside (to help)'. The noun then acquires a range of meanings from "helper", 'intercessor', 'comforter' or 'one who appears on another's behalf'. These are all plays on its fundamental idea. We can use what we need depending on the context.

The passage begins and ends with the disciples love of Jesus, the father's love of Jesus and the disciples through him and the disciples love of each other which, as is indicated in John 13.34-35, is the content of the disciples' obedience. It is, in the very act of such obedience, a sign of trust and hope.

The Spirit comes to us in our endeavour of living out our love of Jesus and the love of God for the world in Jesus. Love is not a romantic notion, as we have seen in our journey, but a turning upside down of all our understandings of relationships so they take on the suffering and joy of the cross. The Spirit, who shares in the secrets of the love between the Father and the Son now comes to the disciples forever. Jesus for a few years; the Spirit forever. The Spirit is the 'new' helper but one they know already because they have been with Jesus, who himself is the source of the water of life that the Spirit brings (John 7.37-39).

Just as Jesus is the Truth so the Spirit is Truth. Truth is not abstract to be debated forever by those interested, but found in the person of Jesus who reveals the love of the Father. That truth now abides in and among the disciples. It is the basis of their being and calling. The Spirit communicates the truth of the ongoing revelation of the love of God in Jesus.

Just as Jesus has experienced rejection so too will the revelation of the Spirit. It cannot see him and therefore, on its logic, it cannot know him. This world, already rejecting the claims of Jesus by rejecting his origins from the father, will still cling to the deceit that it can control its own destiny. The Spirit is the helper with the disciples caught in the divide.

Jesus' physical departure will not be the end of his revealing presence. He will come in the Spirit and there they will find life. It is on the day of the Spirit that they will know their place in the Father, because they are in Jesus, and Jesus dwells in them. There they will find life.

You will have noticed how deeply personal and relational all this discussion is. It is not dry doctrine but a living experience of life in God. And, not just for a chosen few but all disciples. It won't be without its suffering and conflict but it will be full of God's life. We are not in some outer circle of being but wrapped in the very life of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is the substance of our mission; to become the revealing presence of God's love for the world in the Son to the world around, us just as Jesus did. It is also the grounds of our spirituality; relational, personal, grounded in love and bringing to the world rivers of living water.

### *Question*

John's Gospel has shaped Christian spirituality and mission for thousands of years. Take stock of the little we have read so far and reflect on how it might shape us in our context.

I am going to quote from a famous work called *The Go-Between God* by John Taylor;

"The chief actor in the historic mission of the Christian church is the Holy Spirit. He is the director of the whole enterprise. The mission consists of the things he is doing in the whole world. In a special way it consists of the light he is focussing on Jesus Christ.

This fact, so patent to Christians in the first century, is largely forgotten in our own. So we have lost our nerve and our sense of direction and have turned the divine initiative into a human enterprise." (p.3)

Bishop Taylor wrote this in 1972. What has changed, if anything? What do you make of the assertion?

### **BIG QUESTION; RELIGIONS**

We have intellectual and spiritual baggage in this arena so we must tread carefully but, tread we must. We live a world full of religions, and ideas about what makes meaning and purpose, and at a time when some religions and ideologies, fracture under societal changes. None of this is alien to us in a multicultural society. The questions will accompany us on the way.

### **BIG QUESTION; SCIENCE**

I left school at 15 and, when I finally matriculated to university, I studied science. One of the first theological books I read was one on Christianity and science that opened me to the

discussion. I became interested in the history of science and religion, and the impacts of science on issues of meaning and purpose. That science has disproved religion is a common populist theme. Those who read in the history and philosophy of science know that is a hotly debated area and, in history especially, full of myths and legends. It is also an area of fruitful dialogue. In our society, if we wish to make sense of our mission we cannot avoid engaging this dialogue.

Colin Dundon

Easter 2023

## FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

### STUDY SIX—SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

#### Acts 1.6-14

<sup>6</sup>So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' <sup>7</sup>He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' <sup>9</sup>When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup>While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup>They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

<sup>12</sup>Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. <sup>13</sup>When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. <sup>14</sup>All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Perhaps the best way to introduce this reading is with prayer.

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord: Keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace; and bring all creation to worship at his feet, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. **Amen.**

God of majesty, you led the Messiah through suffering into risen life, and took him up to the glory of heaven: clothe us with power you promised on high, and send us forth to the ends of the earth as heralds of repentance and witnesses of Jesus Christ, the first born from the dead, who lives with you now and always in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. **Amen.** (A Prayer Book for Australia pp.517–18.)

These prayers may be used on and after Ascension Day, which was celebrated on the Thursday before this Sunday. They express how our own church understands the theological sentiments expressed in this Acts reading. Jesus' Lordship in heaven and earth is expressed without qualification; it prays for the church's struggle for unity and peace in its own life; and describes the parishioners' as bringing all creation to worship at his feet. The goal of mission is the glorious worship of God.

Furthermore, as such a mission is by no means an easy task, we need to be clothed with the Spirit or the power on high. Our mission is global as well as local and, our message of witnessing to Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead, means calling on all and sundry to change their minds and come under his loving kingdom of justice and peace. Then God can have glory.

It might be a good exercise to sit and pray these prayers each day this week and take time to reflect on our church's understanding of itself and its mission.

The prayers above find their basis in the elements of this story. In many stain glass windows literal visions of the ascension story appear in great detail. We need to be careful here and ask what are we reading?

As an example, as far back as the third century, Origen, a theologian and philosopher, asked how a raised, spiritual Christ could be said “to ascend” using spatial categories. It is a great question because it exposes the nature of the event. Whatever happened, the whole framework is metaphorical; right hand of God, seated, and even the cloud, which is not a meteorological feature, but an indicator of God’s presence, as in the transfiguration stories.

The whole point of this story is not a movement of location but a transformation into a new mode of being with God. Wolfhart Pannenberg argues “Metaphor is... unavoidable if we are dealing with a transformation into a reality which is entirely unknown to us.”

There are many ascensions in Jewish history including Moses and Elijah. However, I think that another reference is missed.

### **Daniel 7.13-14**

<sup>13</sup>As I watched in the night visions,  
I saw one like a human being\*  
coming with the clouds of heaven.  
And he came to the Ancient One\*  
and was presented before him.

<sup>14</sup>To him was given dominion  
and glory and kingship,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
that shall not pass away,  
and his kingship is one  
that shall never be destroyed.

This passage is important for penetrating Jesus’ self-understanding. He used the title, Son of Man, for himself as we can see as we read the Gospels. Christians often read this passage from Daniel as though Christ was coming to us. But the very reverse is the case. It is not about the Son of Man coming to earth; it is the Son of Man (translated ‘human being’ in NRSV) on the clouds that can transport him to the realm of God who approaches the Ancient One.

In this vision, the parallels to the ascension are close. As so many of the themes of this vision are taken up and used of Christ in the New Testament, it is hard to escape the metaphorical elements and theological assertions that give meaning of the ascension. The Son of Man rules for the whole world that it may come into his loving glory. That is his mission and ours. That is the authority for our mission and its privilege, of making it known, is our calling.

This passage ends in waiting, in prayer. That is how mission must be; awaiting God’s next move in the Spirit. Only then is glory given to God, and the rule of Christ among them will be displayed to the world.

### Question

If we honestly pray the prayers for Ascension what is our next move?

If we struggle to pray the prayers, can we sit with our struggle and let it emerge so we can name it? What is our next move?

In our world, how do you wrestle with the uniqueness of Christ and his universal claims?

### 1 Peter 5

<sup>5</sup> Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you <sup>2</sup>to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. <sup>3</sup>Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup>And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. <sup>5</sup>In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders.\* And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’

<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. <sup>7</sup>Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. <sup>8</sup>Discipline yourselves; keep alert.\* Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup>Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters\* throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. <sup>10</sup>And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. <sup>11</sup>To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

<sup>12</sup> Through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother, I have written this short letter to encourage you, and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. <sup>13</sup>Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. <sup>14</sup>Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.\*

The church in mission must itself be in good health. It will not need good programmes so much as great people who form their lives in Christ. Answers to missiological questions do not lie in programs but in transformed, nourished people.

That is Peter’s theme. The churches in Cappadocia were suffering and they needed all the spiritual support they could get. Hence this final passage in this letter. Peter addresses the leadership in words that have resonated down through the ages. The ancient Old Testament pictures of shepherds and flocks (Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34), that find their culmination in Jesus’ declaration the he is the good shepherd, feed this passage with its imagery.

We have all been brought up on sentimental images of shepherds, sheep, and Jesus in stained glass windows. These do not serve us well. The Good Shepherd expects his sheep to follow him on the way of the cross. In the prophets the Shepherd (God) demands that the shepherds (prophets, priests, and kings) follow his path of setting things to rights, justice for

the poor and disadvantaged (orphans, widows, landless), taking on the powerful and wealthy who are their peers. The sheep are to follow the Shepherd.

The key to good pastoral leadership in the church is to keep the eyes on the crucified Christ and the glory to be revealed in him, in the midst of the suffering that the gospel brings. These are the theological guiding stars.

Exercising oversight is neither a power trip nor for making money or a career. Peter knew that the shepherd leaders could easily confuse power and authority as many have done through the ages, until the present. Their authority comes from the crucified Christ not a Golden King sitting on an imperial throne wielding the sword. Their only authority is to follow the shepherd to the cross and the power that flows from that. In the ascension the cross is not obliterated, but takes its place at the centre of divine life. The cross becomes the sign of majesty and glory.

Some of the compulsions and constraints facing them were terribly real. As leaders they would be first in the firing line as far as the local authorities were concerned. That could be a serious compulsion to lay low and refuse the shepherding task. It is unlikely there were full-time overseers who were paid. Their shepherding was a free offering to Christ.

The task would last to the end when the glory of Christ, the chief shepherd, takes the control back.

Peter returns to the significant matter of authority in the church. Authority is grounds for the exercise of the office of shepherd. The only authority given is the imitation of the crucified One. He is the one, in the Spirit, who has power. We love power and we can take it without authority. We humans have shown that we certainly do not want constraints placed on the scope of our authority, which would restrict our use of power. This tension is the play, not only of political history, but church history, too.

Nevertheless, the authority to lead the sheep into the way of the cross is real. And if it is exercised to do that task it must be accepted, whatever the revolutionary grumblings. That is why Peter casts acceptance as he has throughout the letter in terms of humility, which I have defined previously, following John Dickson, as

The choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use you influence for the good of others before yourself. A humble person is marked by a willingness to hold power in the service of others.

This is not a question of a code of conduct, what should we do, but WHOSE we should be. That has been the theme of this letter and a church cannot be fit for the mission of God if it refuses the crucified Christ in its own social arrangements.

We often confuse humility with humiliation. Humiliation is something someone does to us, smashing our sense of self, our dignity as a human being, and ripping our agency from us. We are lessened as human beings. Humiliation is the abuse of authority and can never serve the ends of living the way of the cross.

Humiliation, the abuse perpetrated on a person in a dependent relationship by the more powerful. Our relationships are full of humiliation meted out by the abuse of authority. We see it in the workplace, in politics, in domestic violence, all issues Peter addresses in his day. The humiliated are demeaned and destroyed and laid low. We can see it in the behaviour of



governments towards welfare recipients, the long history of the abuse of aboriginal people, and in our families.

Humility, on the other hand, is a chosen act of a free agent who chooses to walk the way of Christ. We share the dignity of Christ with his strength and courage to choose to use our lives to serve the good of others. The humble person does not have a low self-esteem or act as a doormat for others. Because of Christ they have a strong and healthy sense of their own dignity, worth and abilities.

We live our lives under God's authority and exercise the way of Christ. Just as Jesus did all the way to the cross and for others. To do that we need to trust God's care. We need to be wide awake to our surroundings and well aware of the evil we and others might face. The evil is real and we must take it seriously.

I have written of this before, but it is worth addressing the matter again. I do not know the best way to understand the personality of evil but the reality of evil is an undeniable part of the Christian view of the world. We do not just deal with human error, bad intentions, misfortune, or bad judgements. Sometimes we encounter a power of evil that transcends individual actors or their actions. It can seem like a roaring lion. Racism has roots far deeper than individual prejudice or even the sum total of those prejudices. A deep hatred of another cannot just be written off as an error of judgement. Greed can lodge in human life and institutions in such a way that it takes on a life of its own. Authoritarian political and military power brings swathes of people into subjection. Sometimes all we can say is that evil is both real and strong and purposefully directed towards its goal.

#### *Question*

If God's mission requires the growth of humility between us and in us what might a spirituality of humility look like?

Take time to reflect on the promise of 5.10-11. How can we take encouragement from Peter's affirmation of trust?

How important is it for us to be clear about the nature our authority and its constraints? How should that shape the use of power? Can we have a spirituality that helps us address these issues?

#### **John 17.1-11**

<sup>17</sup> After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup>since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup>And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup>I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup>So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

<sup>6</sup> 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup>Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup>for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. <sup>9</sup>I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because

they are yours. <sup>10</sup>All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. <sup>11</sup>And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

We come to the end our studies, and it is fitting to end here, in prayer. Prayer is Jesus' final act before his betrayal and arrest so the cross casts its lengthy shadow over all that he prays for.

Jesus finished his words to his disciples with the words, "But take courage; I have conquered the world." It looks nothing like that of course. The Empire and its minions are after him already and will strike soon. In Peter's phrase, which we have read above, he is humbling himself under the mighty hand of God. In due time exaltation comes. But evil must have its time.

God's glory comes in the obedience of Jesus to the cross, and that will be Jesus' glory, too. The revelation of eternal life which is knowing the Father in the love of the Son finds its pinnacle. It will come to its great glory in the presence of the Father.

Jesus is the 'sent one' to reveal the character of the Father to the disciples, and his work is now done. They are the ones now in the world. Their trust will be tested. Their commitment to the revelation Jesus has given them will be tested.

All of this Jesus takes to his Father in prayer. We have to remind ourselves that this is the way Jesus prays for us. This is a moment of divine intimacy, and we are bystanders, overing not a sermon or a series of commands but the deep desires of God. This moment should stop for a moment, and bring us to listen.

What can we hear? Our whole venture depends on God. They will always need the Father's protection. They cannot survive without it. The future of the church does not depend on its own work, but depends on God. The revelation he has given us of God's love for the world, our trust, as disciples, in that revelation, and our action on it in the world which does not want it, can lead to severe testing. How will we survive that?

Their strength lies in their intimate life in Christ. The oneness Jesus has with the Father is not an institutional unity. These words have been seriously misunderstood over time. They will survive and continue their task of witnessing when they find their unity in the intimacy of the Father and the Son. Jesus prays for this. It is essential but it is always at risk. It is his prayer for us today so we can complete the task he has left us; to witness to the glory of God.

This prayer reminds us that the nurture of the future is in God's loving care. That will not go uncontested, in the world and in the church, but it will be a truth we live by day by day.

#### *Question*

This prayer for the disciples is rooted in the view that they will continue the witness to the glory of the Father through the glory of the Son on the cross. Is that our view of the church's witness?

Ponder how the Christian community's self-definition would be changed if it took as its starting point, "We are the community for whom Jesus prays." (Gail R. O'Day)

At the end of the prayer invites to live in the trust that, “the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17.26). This is Jesus’ prayer for us. Spend some time meditating on this. What difference does that make to the way we live and conduct our mission.

#### BIG QUESTION: CULTURE

The word ‘culture’ is as slippery as a word can be. From Pop culture to high culture to multicultural the word can be so full of what seems like contradictory ideas and vagaries that it loses precise meaning and is all but useless for use. Culture can come down to my personal choices.

I want to use the word in the following way, which is not a technical definition but an amalgam of pointers drawn from variety of sources that might help us recognise it when we see it.

Culture is the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings and handed on from one generation to another. Language is central because language shapes the visual and musical arts, technologies, law, social order, and political organization. Language also shapes the beliefs, experiences, and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, which give shape and meaning to life and which claims final loyalty.

Briefly, it is the whole way of perceiving, articulating, thinking, and living that which we call modern or postmodern western culture.

Our calling as disciples is to bring the announcements and the events of Jesus life, death, resurrection, and ascension into an encounter with that culture (not another one).

Sounds simple enough, except that the telling of that ‘Jesus’ story calls into question every human culture (including the one we were born in as it did the one it was born in) and alters every human situation with its radical vision.

The Gospel is the Word made flesh thus it is culturally conditioned. Every expression of the gospel, including our own is not “pure”, unadulterated by cultural accretions. There is no distillation of the ‘pure gospel’, that we might use anywhere, at any time, and in any language. Any desire to go there ends in illusion. There is no pure Anglican gospel, no pure Catholic gospel, no pure evangelical gospel. The Gospel is always embodied in cultural beings.

The Word was embodied in flesh, that was embodied in language and culture. And that embodiment altered the human situation. The agent of the gospel is embedded in culture and yet is an agent of its change. This is the struggle of mission.

This is the beginning of serious missiological thought and action.

Colin Dundon

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