

FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

STUDY SIX—SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

Acts 1.6-14

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷ He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ 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.' ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ 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.'

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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

¹³As 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.

¹⁴To 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

⁵ 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 ²to 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. ³Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. ⁴And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. ⁵In 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.’

⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸Discipline yourselves; keep alert.* Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters* throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

¹² 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. ¹³Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. ¹⁴Greet 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 your 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

¹⁷ 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, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶ '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. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And 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

Easter 2023