

7TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

I've had a bad week this week in terms of being given jobs to do. I went along to the Churches together in Chichester Annual Consultation and despite sitting in the back row and feeling cynical; I still managed to be made a member of the new executive committee. Then on Friday I had lunch with the outgoing Diocesan Inter-faith liaison officer and left having agreed that I would consider being the inter-faith representative for the Chichester corner of the diocese. It's not as if I don't have enough to do here in the parish, it's just that, if you don't watch out jobs seem to come your way. This is all rather ironic because I am fairly passionate about the fact that we are not made holy by how much we do but rather by finding ourselves in the Jesus of the scriptures and the sacrament. This isn't a task or a job but a truth.

Today's gospel focuses on Jesus' prayer to the Father that we might all be one – that the truth of who we are is found in our unity with God the Father. It is taken from John 17 which is the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper. It represents not only what, according to John's Gospel, Jesus prayed at the last supper but also the prayer Jesus continues to offer as the ascended high priest in heaven. It's an appropriate prayer to be hearing today because it draws together the totality of Jesus' offering of himself to the Father in a single prayer. If you were here on Thursday for Ascension Day you will have heard that:

The ascension marks the end of Jesus' earthly life but it is not so much an event as part of a movement. Jesus comes from the Father to be born a human in Bethlehem, he teaches and heals and then dies for us, the resurrection shows us that death is not the end that God promises more for us in Jesus. The ascension is the return of Jesus to the Father once his mission is accomplished. It is the completion of this offering of love to the Father.

So today, on this the last Sunday of Eastertide, we hear Jesus offering up to God not just himself and all that he has done, but also all those who believe in him and those who are to believe in the future – not in order to exclude others but as Jesus puts it 'that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' This is a drawing up and a drawing together into the unity, the oneness of God of all who turn to Christ. The Church teaches that we can't believe that everyone might be saved and drawn up into God's Glory but, for me at least, that doesn't stop us hoping that this might still be the case. Surely everything we know about Easter points us to a kind of limitless hope despite everything.

Hope is something we might feel needs a lot of right now as we find ourselves after the ascension of Christ and before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It can feel like a bit of an in between place. Jesus has ascended to his Father in heaven but the spirit has not yet fallen on the disciples.

All through this Easter season there has been something of a tension between the glory of what God has done for us in Jesus, the enormity of God's self offering of love in the cross, the wonder of the resurrection, the ascension and on the other hand our feeble attempts to hear these stories again and to discern what God might be saying to us in the midst of our own sense of contradiction and confusion. We can often feel like we are in that in between place.

Jean Varnier in his wonderful book on John's gospel talks of human beings as 'a mixture of the presence and the absence of God, of light and darkness, truth and chaos, goodness and evil, openness and closedness'. It is for this reason that we cannot just grasp the Easter event and understand it in its entirety.

By ourselves we cannot bridge the gap which separates the finite from the infinite. God reaches over to us. God touches our hearts not in our striving, nor in the many jobs and tasks we take on as if to make our lives more real. The truth is that God speaks to us, as I said all that time back on the Sunday after Easter, in our brokenness, our vulnerability and our fragility. The oneness which Jesus talks about in today's Gospel is not something that we can work to achieve but something that has been given to us. We are not called to build this oneness but to live in it.

And we must live in it not just as individuals but as a community. One of the things I have put on the standing committee agenda this week was to think a bit about our common vision as a church community. How do we reflect the oneness that Jesus spoke of in that prayer? In what sense are we connected to each other? What does it mean, that these groups of people meet together in this building this morning?

If we are faithful to this whole mind-blowing Easter celebration that we are still in the midst of then surely our connection with each other is more than we may think. How can we get to the stage where we can afford to let our guard down, to no longer seek only our own justification, our own truth but to find the truth of God in our unity with others in the Gospel?

When we seek to live in and through the presence of Christ's self offering of himself, through the wonder of the resurrection and the glory of the Ascension, then we live as open to God's gift of life, open to a unity, a truth, a oneness we never thought possible. Amen.

FR.PHIL