

Sunday 28th May 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		7th Sunday of Easter 6th Sunday after Easter - Year A Anglican Communion Sunday Licensing of lay ministers and of Fr Idowu Akinyole
Acts 1:6-14	Ps 68:1-10, 32-35	1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11 John 17:1-11
WHERE DO WE STAND?		

“Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you have given me, that they may be one, as we are one.” (Jn 17:11b)

This final Sunday of Easter is at the heart of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, from Ascension to Pentecost. Today is also known as Anglican Communion Sunday. We are part of a bigger picture. It is appropriate that today we are licensing Lay Ministers – Vuyokazi De Beer and Noncedo Remi-Mnandi, and also Fr Idowu Akinloye (from Nigeria) on behalf of the Bishop. Unity, belonging, connection, relationship. We acknowledge our sister churches; the work and witness of the South African Council of Churches; the Church Unity Commission (Anglican, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian); the World Council of Churches; Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue (ARCIC). It was a special privilege to attend the 200 years anniversary launch for Commemoration Methodist Church, yesterday, and to hear the address by Bishop Andile Mbete. Cathedral clergy have conducted services at Trinity; and Revd Vuyokazi May from Commem is preaching here at our Student service, this evening. I attend a weekly meeting of Grahamstown pastors. These are relationships we value, as well as our archdeaconry and diocesan family, and our Province (ACSA) of Anglicans. It is both historic and formal relationship, and informal connections, working together, sharing in ministry. Unity, belonging, connection, relationship.

This 7th Sunday of Easter falls within Ascensontide – Ascension Day this past Thursday. Our Lord ascended into heaven; he is seated at the right hand of God the Father, in glory; he intercedes for us; his

work on earth is done. He promises the gift of the Holy Spirit – “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and throughout Judea and Samaria, and even in the farthest corners of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

TRAGEDY AND MEANING

There are times when we bear witness to the love of God in the midst of tragedy and sorrow.

Our hearts go out to all who have lost loved ones in the Manchester bombing (22nd May) – mostly teenagers – and all who were maimed, injured – 22 died, many injured; the 28 Coptic Christians who were killed in a bus attack, 25 wounded, in Egypt earlier this week (26th May); victims of intimate partner violence – Karabo Mokoena, murdered a few weeks back.

As a parent I cannot begin to imagine the sorrow and shock of losing a child like this. Our hearts go out to them; our prayers are with them, and with those who are ministering amongst them at this time.

The horrible events all around us are not God’s will for us; it is not God’s will that murderers should take their bombs onto crowded buses and blow them up, or that crazy people are so filled with hate that they walk into a stadium of young people and destroy lives, or that boyfriends should murder their girlfriends – this is not God’s will, God’s plan for those young people. If we could see into God’s heart for those youngsters, I believe we would see great love for them, and God’s desire, dream, that they would live lives of peace and fulfilment and happiness.

But we live in a deeply broken, hurting world; a world of great inequality, poverty, suffering, injustice, hatred, suspicion; it is into this world that God sent his Son Jesus to suffer and die and rise again; the cross of Christ in all its horror and suffering becomes a sign of glory and the presence of God.

THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER OF JESUS

What is God's word, God's will for his creation? For our world? In the face of appalling tragedies, atrocities, brutal acts, broken relationships? Where do we stand?

Part of God's will for his creation is found in John 17 and his prayer for unity - "that they may be one" (17:11).

John 17 is known as the "High Priestly prayer".

Jesus is "the apostle and high priest of our confession [who] was faithful to the one who appointed him" (Heb 3:1-2); "we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God... one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin..." (Heb 4:14-15); he is our high priest who "offered up prayers and supplications" (Heb 5:7); who "became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb 5:9).

The High Priestly prayer is placed before his betrayal and crucifixion, but it makes better sense if we read it – as we do – looking back after the resurrection.

In John's Gospel, it is the Lord's final prayer – there is no prayer in the FE (Fourth Evangelist) in the Garden of Gethsemane.

This prayer reveals God's deep desire that his disciples should be one, just as Jesus and the Father are one. It is not so much his last instruction to us, but rather we are given a glimpse into the relationship between Father and Son, a glimpse into the Lord's heart of love for us.

It is a picture also of the nature of prayer: being open to God, God's prompting, direction; being shaped, formed, by the Spirit; not trying to twist God's arm, to wake God up as he sleeps, to call for God's

attention; we do not need to bully God with our shouts and demands; rather, we place ourselves in this place of intercession so that we may be part of the answer to our prayers. We pray for revival... for healing... for peace... for justice... and as we pray, we also pray “May your will be done in and through us.”

Three themes in the prayer:

1. Glory

“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you... I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.” v 1... v 4-5

The climax of the Lord’s life is the Ascension (in Luke and Acts); in John’s Gospel it is the cross. The glory of God is seen in the cross of Christ.

Glory: “St John is unique among the Gospel writers in identifying the glorification of Jesus with his suffering and death by crucifixion. In the Hebrew Bible, the ‘glory’ of God [is]... the revelation of the divine presence...”¹

Signs of God’s glory: the manna comes from heaven (Ex 16:7); the cloud of God’s presence that led them by day, the fire by night; the cloud of God’s glory that covered Mt Sinai, the tent of the Presence. The splendour and majesty and wonder of God, the mountaintop experience: “...they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was, as it were, a pavement of sapphire, clear blue as the very heavens...” (Ex 24:10) – the overwhelming glory.

St John and the crucifixion:

¹ *Word and Worship* 2017, 216

“...when Jesus was lifted up on the cross, this was his moment of triumph and victory – the cross is the throne from which Christ reigns forever...

The Son glorifies the Father by finishing the work that he was sent to do. It is his hour – kairos – supreme moment of crisis, decision, action (Jn 12:23).

Our purpose – our prayer – that we may bring glory to God.

2. Eternal life

“... you gave him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him...” v 2

His task is to bring life. “That life consists in being in a relationship with God through Jesus – Jesus comes to offer life in relationship... Life is found in knowing Jesus intimately and, through him, being invited into a relationship with the Father.”²

“I came that they may have life, and life in all its fullness.” (Jn 10:10)

3. Unity

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” v 11

Protect them... that they may be one...

UNITY

² *Word and Worship 2017, 217*

Prayer for unity not just of this small band. The disciples are to continue the work of Jesus of calling the world to God. Their unity is the key to the success of their mission.

Where do we stand? In this kairos moment of crisis, decision, action – where do we stand?

Our unity is found in the quality of our relationships.

Our unity with all our diversity and difference is our most powerful witness.

As any sports team will tell you, together anything is possible.

Unity means that we support, we care, we affirm.

Unity means that we recognise our own weaknesses, that we live with wounds and failures and imperfection.

The prayer of Jesus for our unity is in the face of very sharp divisions around race, gender, class, rich and poor, background – may we be one.

The protests on campus last year have left a legacy of deep distrust and division. We are products of a history of violence, oppression, the armed struggle, protest. The history of the church is one of damaged relationships, fragmentation, schism, division.

We are united by all that Christ has done, by our baptism, by our sharing of bread and wine, our faith, our one Lord, his prayer for us.

We are enriched by being together, with all our differences.

Where do we stand in times of conflict, arguments, disagreements? Where do we stand when the word of God comes “like a sharp two-edged sword” to divide and pierce us to the heart? Where do we

stand in this kairos moment for our country? This time of crisis, action, opportunity, decision? As part of the answer to the prayer of Jesus “May they be one” where do we stand? What is God’s call to us?

Where do we stand when unity is seen as a façade, a pretence, when the call for unity is simply a way of avoiding the issues? To stop talking about the pain? #MenAreTrash on social media, following the brutal killing of Karabo Mokoena – Where do we stand?

We continue to pray with Christians all over SA, from Ascension to Pentecost “a collective cry for the Holy Spirit to descend to convict us and heal our land.” We are in the hour of crisis. The kairos moment. Where do we stand?

CONCLUSION

We are Easter people. We celebrate the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, his victory over sin and evil and death.

We live in his prayer for our protection, and that we may be one.

Because of his prayer, we have life and hope, not death and despair...

“Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you have given me, that they may be one, as we are one.” (Jn 17:11b)

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