

Ascensiontide Sermon 24/05/2020

Acts 1 “Men of Galilee, why stand looking into the sky”

John 17 “This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Did you see that excellent letter in the Times by Bishop Stephen Cottrell the other day in response to an editorial which had criticized the Church of England’s response to Coronavirus? He says “Not being able to see things as they are, not see where God is at work, is a common theme at Easter. It is still happening today. I wonder if The Times, like the first followers of Jesus on the first Easter Day, has been looking in the wrong places.” Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for a gardener on Easter day; the two disciples don’t recognise him on the road to Emmaus. And now the writer of Acts pictures the Disciples being told by Angels to stop looking up to heaven – the wrong place to seek the Lord– but to return to Jerusalem where Jesus in the person of the Spirit will return. Medieval art shows them looking up at the soles of his feet disappearing into the clouds. I came across a modern version of that image recently in a poem by the Jewish writer Yehuda Amichai. In his poetry he is often searching for God. In “And that is your glory’ he imagines God as a car mechanic, stretched out on his back, tinkering with the engine above him, and invisible except for the soles of his shoes. The poetry of RS Thomas often expresses a similar longing in the face of God’s apparent silence and mystery. This is Kneeling: (p 66)

Moments of great calm
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun’s light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throug
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message. Prompt me, God
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

Where is God? This period between Ascension day and Pentecost next Sunday is a time of longing for an answer to that question. We pray for the coming of the Spirit to sustain us through this pandemic, to bring an end to the virus, for NHS, Care Home staff and other support workers, and for

the Spirit to lead the Church in the time that will follow, the new normal. Because life will be different for us as individuals, for us as a nation and for the Church. Where is God leading us? One question I have in my mind is: how will our lives be different when this crisis is past? How will the principles of our living have changed? how much of our current restraint on behalf of our fellow citizens – the restraint of Lockdown – should we carry into the post Covid 19 world for the sake of the planet and our environment? – less car mileage and air travel for example, and maybe less meat. Take a minute now, and a pencil and paper and write down three things that will be positively different for you when the pandemic crisis is over, things that have changed for you in recent months that you want to carry on doing or not doing..... And what will the Church look like? Because it will be different. Take those questions and your own into your prayers this week and use some of the words of longing from the end of this Service as you pray for the coming of the Spirit.

Today's gospel can help bring some clarity to our searching. Jesus says "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." This IS eternal life – note that present tense. Unlike the other synoptic gospels in which this happens and then that, Jesus does this and then that, John doesn't have a strong chronology of time – past present and future are brought together, Pentecost happens on the evening of Easter day as Jesus breathes on the disciples, for example. And in the I am sayings (I am the bread of life) or when he says in chapter 8 "Before Abraham was, I am" That's something his hearers then and our time bound minds now find difficult to understand! But I heard on the Today programme the other day an interesting talk by the novelist Ian McEwan in which he spoke about how Lockdown and Covid 19 had altered our attitude to time. The future and future planning were difficult to think about, drawing us to concentrate on the present and the past. He quoted Kierkegaard "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." He said that the second half of that sentence had become more difficult. One day merges into another and Friday and Monday seem much the same. So for example I know that my stipendiary colleagues are busy, but at the same time they probably have more blank pages in their diaries looking ahead than they are used to. Things happen more immediately. That is a world the writer of John would have understood, drawing us to reflect about the past and to focus on seeking God in the present – the meaning is in the waiting as RS Thomas says.

So there is opportunity as we are forced to slow down – to ask God to sharpen our spiritual antennae to discern where his Spirit is leading us and to glimpse her afresh in this moment in this place. I like the way that the closure of our church buildings has encouraged us to find faith in the everyday worlds of our homes and with those we see each day rather than by going to church. RS Thomas, Welsh Anglican priest and poet, talked about the ubiquity of God – he is everywhere and in everything and therefore not to be discerned as separate from Creation. His poetry encourages us to seek God by the apophatic way, the way of not knowing, of ambiguity and uncertainty, of half light, the light of the moon rather than the sun. Do pray earnestly and with longing for the coming of the Spirit this week, and expect God to answer your longing, your waiting, your searching – but in ways that will surprise and possibly unsettle you. Maybe you will find that you have been looking in the wrong places or with the wrong eyes. A few years ago we were on holiday in Greece. The guidebook said there was a beautiful gorge nearby, a dried up river bed, so we went to look for it. We parked the car by a sign pointing to the gorge and walked down a dusty track. After some time we began to ask "where is it?!". It was hot and we were tired! Then we realized we had been in the gorge for the past 10 minutes but hadn't had the eyes to see it. With fresh eyes we appreciated the beauty that had been all around us. Let me end with another famous poem by Thomas, The Bright Field

I have seen the sun break through
To illuminate a small field
For a while, and gone my way
And forgotten it. But that was the pearl
Of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it, Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past, It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.