

SERMON, 16 MAY 2021 – ACTS 1.15-17,21-end, John 17.6-19

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This week we've gone back, almost back to the beginning of Acts. The story of the Ascension we had on Thursday, and now the ministry must continue. 120 people believe that Jesus is alive, believe that Jesus is the Messiah – but I've used those two phrases as if all 120 knew exactly what that meant. I'm sure they didn't, there was no textbook which told you what to believe, but they knew that Jesus was of God, he was worth following. Perhaps some of them had been healed by him, perhaps some of them had been moved by his teaching, perhaps some of them had waved their palm branches. They had all felt a sense of devastation when their leaders had handed him over to be crucified, but now they believed it was not over.

So Peter and the other ten disciples have got to sort this. I wonder if he had sat down with his wife and said “darling, you realise I won't be coming home and fishing again” – there's a level of commitment required, from the disciples and their families. That's not changed. And they feel there ought to be twelve of them. Twelve disciples, and the number is important. Twelve tribes of Israel – and anyway, Jesus chose twelve, and we need to replace the traitor.

You do wonder how angry Peter and the others were with Judas. Was he the betrayer, the one who had gone against everything that they stood for – or did some of them see a sense of inevitability in it all, and mourn the suicide of their friend?

It wasn't only the twelve disciples who had been with Jesus from the beginning. There is the group of “women”, and may God forgive us that through the whole of the history of the church we have been good at lumping half the world's population in as “the women”. They weren't all called Mary, though it sometimes seems like it. This passage tells us that there were other men who had been there from the baptism to the resurrection, and were still there. Believing, following – taking the gospel forward.

“Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.” They pray, they draw lots, the Holy Spirit tells them what to do, “the lot falls on Matthias.” He is now one of the twelve – and in the calendar of the church he gets a Festival Day like all the others. He doesn't get mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, but tradition has it that he preached the gospel up north, up round the Caspian Sea, in the area of Georgia. Tradition also has it that he was stoned to death – which puts our Christian service into some sort of perspective.

I have a soft spot for the other man. Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, the chap is remembered for ever as the bloke who didn't get the job! Many of us have needed him as our Patron Saint over the years. Legend says that he did all right for himself – he ended up as Bishop of Eleutherpolis, a Roman town about 40 miles south west of Jerusalem, on the road to Gaza. He too, died a martyr – in an area of the world where men and women are dying today.

Talking of Bishops, can we pray for Bishop Hosam Naoum please. He was consecrated as the new Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem last Thursday, Ascension Day. You can sit and watch all 2½ hours of the live-steaming of his service – you are more likely to watch a video about “Hope”, a four minute video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrPnO-XnsB4>. I've put the link on our website. His talk on hope was filmed before the latest violence – let's pray that he, our fellow Christians – and the Jews and the Muslims – can overcome differences, defeat violence, and move forward in hope.

And then we have the Gospel. John 17 is one of the hardest pieces of John's gospel to understand. John has used a large chunk of his writing to give us the words of Jesus in prayer to His Father, in what we know as the farewell discourse. Through this Jesus explains his ministry, the future, to the disciples – but, to be frank, it is not clear, it is not straightforward, it is not simple. The Theologian who writes a piece every week on “Sunday's readings” for the Church Times describes it rather beautifully like this:

*The words of the prayer are like a sparkling surface of water in sunlight, each flash gone in a moment, but leaving a trace of transcendence in our minds.*

In wedding vows we use the phrase “mystical union”, symbolised by the sharing of persons and property, undergirded, infused, full of love. None of us can fully explain our relationships, even with the people we are closest to – and it's a bit like that with God, with Christ. This passage has us in relationship with God, and God in relationship with us – and we struggle to put that into words.

Christ talks about protection – and if you are a human being in so many parts of the world today that is probably higher up your agenda than it is for us. You may have seen the pictures from Glasgow on Thursday where the Home Office team arrived to remove two Indian immigrants, and the whole community rose up to protect them. “These are our neighbours” they said, and eventually the officials withdrew. None of us can imagine what it must be like to have no rights, no one is ever going to come and remove us.

There were also reports on the BBC about people coming from Europe for job interviews in this country, job interviews that they believed there were perfectly entitled to come to, only to find they have been stopped at the airport and taken into custody as one person's definition of the immigration rules is different to that of another's. At the beginning of this month, a 25 year old girl from Spain, who had worked in this country before, arrived at Gatwick, believing she had the right to seek work. She was told she did not, and has been taken to Yarl's Wood Detention centre near Bedford. Apparently she has been confined to a room there for the couple of weeks, no mobile phone, no visitors.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-citizens-detained-uk-work-visas-brexit/>

We call ourselves a Christian country – may God forgive us. We hope and pray that God is protecting Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, but she's not the only one who needs protection in this cruel world of ours.

There is hate, there is evil, there is fear – and there is love, joy and resurrection faith. Christians are involved in fighting the evil – in Scotland alone there are more than 70 charities and faith groups who have stood up to condemn the Home Office's "New Plan for Immigration". In Derby, our friends at Just Ice ice cream work to provide meaningful job opportunities for people who have fled war and violence that you and I can't imagine, and I received details last week of a social enterprise called "Upbeat Clean" providing safe work for refugee women. If you're looking for a cleaner, let me know, and I'll pass the info on.

Christian Aid week has not just been a money-raising exercise, Christians (and so many others) are involved in the fight against the evils of Covid and Climate change. We as a church are planning an Eco event on the afternoon of Sunday 25 July, there's enthusiasm and commitment from some of our younger people, enthusiasm and commitment that the old ones among us must encourage and build on.

As Jesus prays to his Father, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" – so we don't do this in our own strength, we do it in his. God is at work, working through his people, resurrection is a reality – and we build the kingdom together.