

Acts 1: 6 – 14; 1 Peter 4: 12 -14, 5: 6 – 11; John 17: 1 - 11

‘Travelling through time’

I wonder if any of you watched the TV crime drama “Magpie Murders” recently? It was based on a novel of the same name and adapted for television by the novel’s author, Anthony Horowitz. It is a most unique piece which sets out to tell two parallel stories: one set in the real (present) world where the author of a murder mystery is found dead before his latest novel is published. The other in the fictional past: a murder mystery that the author has created. The author’s own life and death mirror to some extent the death of a fictional writer in his novel. If you haven’t watched it, I’d highly recommend a trip to BBC I-player, but why am I advertising this piece of tv drama? Really it is to highlight the way in which the piece moves effortlessly back and forth, not between fiction and fact, but between times and places and characters. It is a reminder of how a piece of writing can use time and spatial changes to draw us into a deeper understanding of both past and current events. Our readings today have something of this time change about them. The chosen texts today move forwards and backwards try to give us some idea of the colossal change that swirls around the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. No small task!

A preacher from *St Mark’s Presbyterian Church (Maryland)* has written: ***“On this last Sunday of the Easter season, we look both backwards and forwards. We have already heard about Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances to his disciples; today we hear part of the glorious ascension story. Next week we will celebrate the birth of the new church, going forth in mission with the gifts of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.”*** The readings for today move in and out of Eastertide.

The **passage from Acts** is a post -resurrection piece, an account of the Ascension and tells of those 11 disciples who witness it realizing that this moment in time is the true affirmation of the resurrection and also the true break with the past. Yet even with this understanding they remain uncertain as to how to act, what to do. Perhaps they still expect, or wish Christ to triumph in human terms, to establish an earthly kingdom: one of worship, but nonetheless rooted on earth. In this passage there is a continuing sense of awakening and wonder amongst his disciples, who are invited to witness the event, but who, from the questions they ask him on that hillside seem to remain frightened and confused by his impending ascension to heaven. Not unlike us: we understand and rejoice in the resurrection, but despite the joy of Easter there are still times for all of us when we feel unsure of what to do with our knowledge.

In the reassurance Jesus offers on that hillside, the disciples receive hints of the coming Holy Spirit, to be their indwelling companion in the task of living the life God intends for them and for all of us: in and through Christ. This time for the disciples however is still a mixture of fear and possibility. ***“As they head off into the unknown, life without Jesus, their leader who has challenged and nurtured them, there is much to be afraid of and much to be excited about.”*** The reassurance they receive is not what they might expect and yet it is a reply of love, of hope and of promise. It is offered to them at that moment on the hillside, it is offered to us all here and now. Jesus is leaving them physically, but will remain with them as they allow the Holy Spirit to enter their hearts and minds through prayer and action. The disciples return to their house after the event to pray with the others, including the women, Jesus’ mother among them and to await in faith the promise of the friend to come.

The fact that this promise is fulfilled is clear **in the letter from Peter**. This passage is also set post-resurrection and of course post ascension: written for a church newly formed in the power of these events. Peter is looking to deal with the natural anxieties and hopes of the early and much persecuted Christians. He reminds his readers of the promise that Christ does not abandon them, and that God's Kingdom awaits all those who through their shared faith and companionship, (the same faith we share in this church gathered today) are confident in the knowledge that the Holy Spirit has burst into the world.

Nonetheless although there is this promise for the future, Peter tells his followers to remain in the present, even when that is very difficult or downright dangerous, because it is in the present that they receive the faith for the future they will pass on to others. It is by remaining steadfast in their present predicament that a future freedom will be found for all the world. Bold claims indeed, but even in our own times, doesn't it make sense for us to show the world how much our faith drives our lives? The rule of God needed to be lived out then and now to show that the Christian Community is Easter-powered

The Gospel reading takes us backwards in time. It is set before Easter. It is part of Jesus' final discourse with the disciples prior to his arrest. The narrative again takes us to a group of frightened and confused followers. They see the danger coming but cannot understand, or accept its inevitability in the mission of Christ. It is in the heaviness of this atmosphere that Jesus prays the "High-Priestly Prayer." The prayer is an intercession: it is spoken for those disciples. Much as our intercessions will be spoken for us during this service. It is prefaced by Jesus' own request to his Father to glorify him: to show Christ's divinity and power just as Jesus has shown that of the Father. Christ's glory is revealed in death, resurrection and ascension and this opens the promise of the Kingdom. The intercessory words of the prayer relate to his disciples, not to the world in general. However, as I hope we now understand time changes, backwards and forwards, and we read the words as also interceding for us in the present. They are words which commend his disciples to God, so that with God's loving protection they may take God's Word into the world. He prays for his followers naming them not as frightened and incapable people, but as those whom God had already chosen to give to Christ. It is human to be frightened and uncertain, and certainly they show those characteristics, but Jesus' prayer acknowledges them as those who **do** understand that he has come from God and who have accepted their calling to follow him in faith. When he is no longer with them, they will act as a community of faith, even when the times seem difficult and in turn will bring that faith to the world. and make disciples of others: a task which will resonate throughout the ages. Such a difficult task will need God's protection. This importance and the real power of living out the faith is clear in the text Peter writes to the Christian community. The Gospel words predate the community that Peter describes, but the power of the Gospel anticipates the success of that group of faithful disciples.

The prayer of John's Gospel; the awe of the Ascension, the promise of the Holy Spirit, the prayerful and active courage of the early church are all part of who we are now. We **do** have God's protection; we **do** have the power of the Holy Spirit and we are encouraged by being Easter people. Jesus prays for us to know each other and to know God, just as he himself knows us and knows God. In the present we too are charged to take that understanding of who Christ is as the guide for our own lives and to bring it to fruition in our relationships with a World that so much needs to know God: just as much today as in centuries past and no doubt in times still to come. Forwards, backwards: past, present, future we are a truly blessed Easter people. Amen

Refs. St Mark Presbyterian Church Maryland; Lectionary Commentary Brueggemann et al