

St Francis & St Mary's Holy Communion 28th May 2017

7th Sunday of Easter

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

today is the 7th and last 'Sunday of Easter', and we are poised like the disciples in Acts 1 after the Ascension, waiting for Pentecost, for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and all that lies beyond

in this lead-up to Pentecost, I want to continue to explore what the Holy Spirit means, to them and to us; first a recap from last week where we thought about the Spirit as 'Jesus in another guise'

Martin Luther called the Holy Spirit 'alter Christus', 'another Christ', to convey the important truth that the Spirit is not strange, but is and does all that Jesus was and did

we also thought last week about our need for the boldness, wisdom, inspiration that the Holy Spirit alone can give, so that we can be witnesses to Jesus and make a difference in the world

the need for that help has been brought into even sharper focus this week by the shocking bomb attack in Manchester; all we can do is to cry, 'Lord, have mercy! Come, Holy Spirit! give us, give them renewed strength and hope and courage!'

today we continue in John's gospel, where we read part of Jesus' prayer at the end of the Last Supper: it began, 'after Jesus *had spoken these words*, he looked up to heaven and said ...'

now 'these words' include all Jesus says in the previous chapters, things like: 'I am the vine, you are the branches, abide in me and you will bear much fruit'; 'greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends'; 'love one another, so the world will know you are my disciples', and much, much more

but, running through it all, is this promise of the Holy Spirit, who will make all this truth real, and make all these commands possible; and it's all because Jesus is leaving them and going to the Father

now, imagine that you're there in that room, that you've just heard all that from Jesus, and then he turns his eyes to heaven and begins his prayer; this prayer is for you, the ones he calls his friends; how does Jesus pray here?

did you know that the Lord's Prayer never makes an appearance in John's gospel? instead we have this 'High Priestly' prayer of Jesus, in which we find some parallels with our familiar 'Lord's Prayer':

we begin, 'our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven'

Jesus prays here: 'Father, glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you'; as in the Lord's Prayer the initial focus is on God, on his will and his ways being known and realised in the world

Jesus goes on: ‘this is eternal life, that they may know you ... and Jesus Christ whom you have sent’; ‘I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do’; when we pray, is this our starting point – the glory and knowledge and will of God being manifest?

we’ve just begun our ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ prayer initiative, with opportunities to pray together every day, or the invitation to join in prayer wherever we are; but how do we pray, ‘Thy kingdom come’? we need to begin with a desire for God’s glory to be seen and for his ways to be known; then all the rest of our concerns fall into their proper place

what does Jesus then pray for, when he says, ‘I am asking on their behalf ... those whom you gave me’? that’s us, sitting there in that room listening to his prayer – what is it going to be?

‘holy Father, protect them ... that they may be one’: protection and unity, perhaps an echo of the words of the Lord’s Prayer: ‘lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’

in this prayer, where’s the Holy Spirit? for only Jesus and his Father seem to be in view here! the Spirit is implicit, he is the means by which this prayer will be answered: it is the Holy Spirit who reveals Christ to us, who unites us and keeps us in God’s love

we see this theme also in Peter’s letter, written to Christians who are being persecuted, under pressure to renounce their new faith and revert to Pagan worship; this would be the easy path, to conform to the expectations of the society around them, to ‘go with the flow’ but Peter writes: ‘rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings ... you are blessed, because the Spirit of God is resting on you’

this might seem a strange blessing of the Spirit, to suffer for our faith, but perhaps that’s because most of us have never experienced anything of that sort; our lives as Christians in this country are too easy, too comfortable; we don’t suffer anything beyond a mild embarrassment or mockery; we experience no real trouble, but we gain no real blessing either!

imagine, though, recalling this prayer of Jesus under harsh oppression – how reassuring it must be to know that God has not abandoned you! as Peter writes here: ‘after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you’; somehow there is blessing in the suffering, for God is especially close then

one group of Christians today who do suffer greatly are those in Pakistan; according to Open Doors, Pakistan ranks number six in the world, with ‘extreme levels of persecution against Christians’; how do Christians there cope with this?

[interview with Kiran Joseph and Azhar William about some of what their friends and family have experienced in Pakistan

what is it like to be a Christian in Pakistan?

how do Christians respond to this situation?

are Christians able to find God’s blessing despite this?

how do they hang on to their faith?]

in closing, there are two works of the Holy Spirit for us to focus on today: that we might know God in Christ – very necessary if we're to bear true witness to him! and that we might be united in love and witness, and find God's blessing in that – even, or especially, when we feel under pressure

we end again with the special *Thy Kingdom Come* prayer:

Almighty God, your ascended Son has sent us into the world to preach the good news of your kingdom: inspire us with your Spirit and fill our hearts with the fire of your love, that all who hear your Word may be drawn to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.