

Reflection for the 7th Sunday of Easter by Rev'd Canon Micvhael Last

Thursday was Ascension Day and marked the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. With the passing of the Ascension the focus of the church year turns towards Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The ten-day gap between Ascension and Pentecost is a time when we are encouraged to focus on our need for renewal, both corporately and individually: renewal that touches the very depths of our being: renewal that calls us to prepare afresh for the task that lies ahead - the task, as Jesus puts it in Luke's gospel, of sharing the gospel (good news) *"in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."*

This idea of preparing and renewing is picked up in two of this morning's readings. In Acts, the disciples and believers do two key things in this short period.

Firstly, *"they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer."*

Just this week, Scottish Church leaders, including Bishop Mark, have encouraged us to do the same, by taking part in the global prayer initiative "Thy Kingdom Come", saying *"At this time especially, we commend this initiative to you and invite you to participate and pray: 'Thy Kingdom come'."*

Secondly, the disciples chose a replacement for Judas Iscariot.

Why was this such a significant event? Not just because it made up the numbers, but it was far more significant than that. It was about the group's whole identity and their understanding of who they were and the task that lay ahead.

From its very outset, the Church regarded itself as the new Israel, inheriting the mission of the traditional twelve tribes, which was to bring the nations of the world to the knowledge of God. Therefore there needed to be twelve Apostles for compliance with what they saw as Jesus' intention and for apostolic authority.

Thus they elect, by lots, Matthias to replace Judas. Luke is keen to show not only that Matthias has taken Judas' place but that it has been done properly and that Matthias is very much an apostle - this act of preparation, of restoration, was both correct and legal.

Turning now to our gospel reading, we see Jesus praying for the disciples and specifically that the disciples will not be taken in by the ways of the world in a way that will drag them away from both him and the mission that lay before them. His prayer is that they be kept clean. *"And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."*

If we are to be spiritually renewed we need to be washed clean of all that separates us from God: all that gets in the way, all that drags us back, all that stops us fulfilling the mission and ministry to which we have been called.

This washing is not just some external bath; rather, a real renewing of our very hearts and minds. As one of the prophets says – *“I will give you a new heart and a new mind. I will take away your stubborn heart of stone and give you an obedient heart.”*

To change the metaphor - this is not just a repair job, a piece of sticky tape covering up the cracks; rather a heart transplant. The situation is as serious as that. God needs to replace completely the sinful heart that each of us has with one that is obedient to his will and ways. As Jeremiah puts it *“Who can understand the human heart? There is nothing else so deceitful; it is too sick to be healed.”*

For us to be renewed, to become Christ like, then we need a new spirit and a new heart - one that thinks that acts like Christ.

This is not a DIY job. It is one of the roles of the Holy Spirit to renew and to transform. And each of us needs to be open to the working of the Holy Spirit, willing not only to allow him to work but also willing to acknowledge the renewing work he does. It is the Holy Spirit that turns lives upside down; at times almost beyond recognition.

What must it have been like for Ananias to be asked to go and pray with a man named Saul? The man who had come to Damascus to rid the place of Christians - Saul the activist, Saul the last person a Christian would have wanted to meet. And yet when Ananias arrives he finds is that the Spirit has already begun to put that new heart in Saul, so much so that he becomes Paul, one of the key figures in spread the very message he had tried to stamp out. At the very heart of that ministry lay the internal renewing touch of God. The same needs to be true for us, if we are to be used as people who can truly share the message with others. The renewal starts at home, it starts here, with me.

In some ways lockdown, with our churches closed, is a bit like the waiting period between Ascension and Pentecost. We want to get back into our buildings, back to what we normally do. But we have to wait! As we wait we need to use this time like the disciples did - to pray and to prepare.

O Lord sprinkle me with clean water. Remove from me all that has defiled me and dragged me away from you. Give me O Lord a new heart and a new mind.

Take away all that is stubborn and give me an obedient heart. Place your spirit within me that I follow your laws and keep all the commandments, faithfully witnessing to you.

Amen