

Reflection for the 4th Sunday of Easter by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

As we move through the Easter season, have you noticed the way the Revised Common Lectionary, which we use, replaces the Old Testament reading each Sunday with one from St Luke's second book – The Acts of the Apostles. Having noticed that have you ever reflected on why?

Maybe the place to start is with Easter Day – that day of very real and conflicting emotions for the disciples. One writer has put it like this

“First the women had reported the tomb empty. ‘Just like women,’ said the men, till some of them went there too and found the women were right after all. Then the body which had disappeared, reappeared—a corpse no more, but alive and well; at least Mary Magdalene claimed to have seen it and so did some of the other women, and when in due course it appeared to Simon Peter also (by this time, surely, no longer “it” but ‘he’), that seems to have convinced the company gathered in the upper room that Jesus had risen indeed. Into this gathering burst the two from Emmaus, with the detailed account of their own experience; and while yet his living presence was the subject of their tale, suddenly it became once more the reality in their midst.

His coming found them believing and unbelieving, startled and joyful and afraid all at once. Emotionally, they were thoroughly confused.”

All that confusion is slowly replaced by understanding and answers to the many questions they have, as Jesus appears among them. These conversations through are more just answering their questions, they are also a blueprint for the task that lies ahead of them - a blueprint that still holds true and from which the church can learn much, as it carries the same baton today. Hence, our reading from Acts, which shows the frightened disciples developing into the apostles of the growing and developing church.

As you look at the blueprint there appear to be four key elements to consider.

Firstly, a clear biblical theology. *“Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “This is what is written: the Messiah must suffer and must rise from death three days later”.* The answers they sought, the understanding they longed for, the foundation they needed were there already - written down for them in the scriptures if only they would look and study them.

We live in world that loves manuals and guidance notes; they seem at times to rule our lives. Just complete this form; oh! and by the way here are the notes that you need to consider. The notes are usually longer than the form and “it is strongly recommended that you read them fully before completing the form.”

For the church and for individual Christians the Bible should carry the same status marking - “strongly recommended” for within its pages are not only the answers the disciples sought, but also the foundations of a sound biblical theology. As the 39 Articles of Religion in the English Book of Common Prayer puts it *“Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation”.*

One of things that should be at the very heart of church life is a strong biblical knowledge and understanding. When the church allows biblical theology to be watered down it can all too quickly find itself on a slippery downward slide. Scripture is the starting point for the commission Jesus gives to the disciples, as should it be for the church today.

Secondly, they are given an evangelistic program.

In his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all

nations, beginning in Jerusalem.

Having found the answers, they are looking for in scripture they are not to remain silent but to go and proclaim it. They have a message of repentance and forgiveness to share.

We have the same call to share the gospel message and, like those disciples may be fearful about fulfilling it. The disciples were a handful of confused people, yet they are being asked to turn the world upside down. It is not just about talking with their neighbours in Jerusalem but all nations.

Look at the pages of Acts and you begin to see this challenge being fulfilled. It is very much like watching a stone being dropped into a pond and watching as the ripples reach all areas of the pond. We see this is in today's reading, with Peter now in Joppa and moving away from Jerusalem.

It is also worth reminding ourselves of three things.

1. They had to be committed to the task.
2. It would challenge things that they held as most sacred. Think of Peter having to struggle with whether or not to visit Cornelius, the Roman soldier. Did all nations, really mean the gentiles? Or the debate about food – did you have to follow the Jewish Laws if you became a Christian?
3. The cost would be high. Many of them receiving Jesus' commission would have literally to walk the way of Christ, the way of the cross.

Or look at our gospel reading, part of that passage in which Jesus talks about himself as the Good Shepherd *"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."* Or from earlier in that section *"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."*

Again, nothing has changed – the task still needs to be completed and we are called to continue in the disciple's footsteps. If we do engage fully with that commission, it may well be challenging and even change us.

Thirdly, they were given apostolic authority.

"You are witnesses of these things."

They were entrusted not only with proclaiming, with carrying out the evangelistic programme but also safeguarding the truth, passing on what had really happened. In many ways this is something we in the modern world have become less good at - passing things on intact. So often things are given a slant or a spin to make them say or mean what we want them to mean.

The reality of the gospel message, being the living witness to the resurrection events, is what is entrusted to the church. We give it away or mess with that apostolic message at our peril - *"You are witnesses of these things."*

Finally, they are given a spiritual dynamic. *"You must wait in the city until the power from above comes down upon you."* Aware of the frailties and shortcomings of this group of disciples, Jesus does not leave them alone to carry out his great commission; he sends to them the Holy Spirit as their strength, guide, and helper - something we shall no doubt look at in more detail in a few weeks time as we celebrate Pentecost.

Four important elements that should be at the heart of any church's life.

A strong biblically based theology.

An evangelistic program.

A clear understanding of apostolic authority and the need to remain faithful.

A desire for the spirit of God to blow through us.