

Reflection

For 16.05.21 – Easter 7

By Bishop Nicholas Chamberlain



A Reflection on Acts 10.44-48; Psalm 98, 1 John 5.1-6; John 15.9-17.

Good morning, everyone, it's lovely to be with you today. I'm sorry not to be able to be 'in person' in every parish, but what I am saying now, is what I will be saying in person in Holbeach Fen and Whaplode.

I hope that you are having a joyful Eastertide, despite the constraints that are still so much part of life, and that, as we now begin to look towards Pentecost, you are able to think about the coming gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift which brings strength, confidence and reassurance.

Our gospel reading this morning is part of the intimate account that St John gives which is called the Farewell Discourse, and is the words of Jesus to his disciples after the Last Supper has been concluded, and before they leave for Gethsemane. St John is the only gospel to include this discourse. The other three move straight from meal to darkness. In some churches, taking us back to Maundy Thursday, the Discourse is read during the watch, once the table has been stripped, and before Jesus' arrest is marked. The discourse itself lasts from chapter 14 to chapter 17, and includes powerful and beautiful teaching, such as about Jesus being the vine and us being the branches, which is a picture of belonging that is reassuring, but that is also challenging, because the vine is called to be fruitful and will therefore receive pruning.

Today's part of the discourse doesn't include a picture, as such, but if you listen to the tone of the words, I think you will find in what Jesus says, eloquent expression of his love for his friends, and, therefore, for us as well:

'Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.'

How beautiful!

Here is the saviour of the world expressing his concern for his disciples, focusing on them, not his coming trial. These are words that invite being read and pondered and prayed about, and perhaps that might be something that we could do this coming week: sit down with Jesus' farewell discourse, and read it over to ourselves, asking God to help us to make sense of it now. Another thing that we might do this coming week, however, is to make a list of our favourite parts of Jesus' teaching, so that we could have it ready to share with someone who might ask us to do so.

Why do I suggest this? Well, I've been reading some research that has been undertaken over the last year or so, and it has revealed just how many people have been asking questions about faith as a result of Covid and lockdown. People have been asking about the value of life, about life and death, about the importance of being able to have a place in which to mourn, about the meaning of life, about the existence of God, about Jesus.

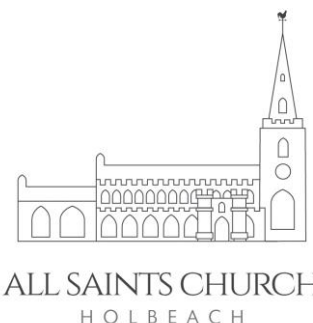
These are big questions, and they are questions for all of us. Some of them are far more likely to be asked in a conversation in a shop or in a pub garden, than, in the first instance, in a church. And they won't just be asked of the vicar, either, if there is one, they'll be asked of us all, so how will we answer them?

I don't think we should be frightened of being asked questions; I think we should welcome them. And I don't think we should worry, as it were about getting the answer wrong, because there usually isn't a wrong answer to this kind of question and because most of us can answer from our own

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experience, with real honesty and truthfulness. For example, 'I've been wondering about Jesus and I know you go to church: why do you do that and what is it about Jesus that attracts you?' If I were to answer that, I would reply:

'I go to church because it helps me to be part of something - to belong - and what attracts me about Jesus is the way that he teaches all different types of people to look beyond the surface of life to the things that matter underneath. My favourite teaching is either the Prodigal Son, or the Parable of the Sower, and it's his friendship with Martha and Mary and Lazarus that makes me think that even I might matter to him.'

Of course there could then be follow up questions, such as 'the church says this about - whatever - and I don't agree,' so I'm not trying to be naive in what I'm suggesting here, but the first question, and the question about Jesus, can be answered simply and directly.

Everyone can answer 'why do you go to church?' And everyone can answer 'what is it about Jesus that attracts you?'

We all might need to do just a little bit of homework! That's why I suggested that you might read the Farewell Discourse this week. Alternatively, as you walk the dog, or make the bread, or drive to work, you might think:

'well, it's this story about Jesus that really attracts me, and that I wouldn't mind sharing with someone else.'

Actually, I suspect you'll end up with a number of things: some of Jesus' teaching, some of the things he did, and if you do, there's no harm in just writing them down and making yourself a checklist.

What I'm trying to say is that as we worship together this morning, and feel something of the intimacy, the love, the concern, that Jesus has for his friends, we might recognise that this intimacy, love and concern extends beyond the first disciples, whose feet he has just washed and with whom he has just eaten, to us as well.

We, the people of this part of Lincolnshire, are God's people, and our friends, family and neighbours, have been wondering about God, wondering about life, during this last Covid-marked year. And we can help them.

What an Eastertide gift it might be, to listen and to talk and to share something that really matters to us and brings us life!

'We are an Easter people and alleluia is our song!' - words from St Augustine and the early days of the church.

And we haven't been able to sing much, recently, but we will be able to, in time, and until then, as we sing in our hearts, and shout our Alleluias, because we can do that, we have the opportunity to share our faith with friends in conversation.

Because, alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!