

Sunday, May 24, 2020

Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

“That All May Be One”

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! We rejoice on this Seventh Sunday of Easter because the Spirit of God is amongst us as we worship separately but together! We gather to praise God because His Son Jesus was dead and is alive forevermore! And as we remember these last weeks we are reminded that we mourned our sin during Lent, commemorated Christ's death on Good Friday, and celebrated his resurrection on Easter. Here, 40 days later we celebrate what all of this means for us as Christians- we experience the joy and wonder of Jesus as King. On this Last Sunday of this Season of Easter we focus on Jesus' Ascension into heaven. A day of mixed emotions for the disciples but a day when God receives Jesus the Son with the Spirit into his heavenly presence.

Jesus was born with a purpose- to live, die and rise again for the sake and purpose of the reconciliation of all people with God. Through Jesus's death and resurrection, we and all who went before us and all who follow us have the ability to be reconciled of our sins, forgiven and given a chance to live new lives. Jesus knew that after his days of teaching, preaching and healing that he would be arrested, tried and put to death. He also knew that he would rise again and would return to the Father some day. And when he would ascend to heaven he would take his seat at God's right hand after his purification for sin. Jesus is seated there, but he is not silent. Now the ascended Christ ministers and intercedes for his followers and those who believe in him. (Heb 1, 8:1-2, 7:25)

After Jesus' resurrection and prior to his ascension, Jesus had to prepare his disciples for what would happen next in their lives and he did this, because he loved them. The disciples had seen the Risen Jesus on different occasions, they ate with him and others had witnessed his living presence. Jesus had then told them what was going to happen. They didn't fully understand but they believed he was the Saviour and God's Son.

Where was Jesus just before his arrest? In the Garden of Gethsemane praying- sweating as he prayed for God's will to be done and that his closest followers would be able to share His story with the world. In John 17, we read of Jesus praying to God the Father and he knows that the time was soon approaching for the prophecies of his death to be fulfilled. He knew that his accusers and those representing the state would soon be there to arrest him. It is in his time of prayer that we learn what he asks God to do. He states, "God I glorified you on

Earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. Now glorify me in your presence with the glory I had before the world existed.” Jesus was asking God to enable him to return his place in heaven because he did what he was to do. He had taught the people close to him and they kept their word. They know the truth that Jesus came from above and they believed. Jesus then asks God the Father, to protect them in His name so that they may be one, as we are one.” Jesus asked God to protect those people who were his faithful followers and to keep them safe so that they would be one with each other -just like Jesus and the Creator God are one. Jesus is concerned for their well being because when they travelled the countryside and followed him in faith, he was physically present with them. So Jesus knows that these faithful followers, which includes us too, need the Advocate, the Spirit, the Guide and Protector with them. Jesus had told the disciples that they would not be left as orphans; that the spirit would come and guide them and so in this prayer to the Father, Jesus is asking for this to happen before his death. He knows they need support and love and compassion in the days ahead as he is arrested, tried and crucified. Jesus knows that they believe and trust him, but they are also human and need support for what was to occur.

We continue to stay home most of the time. At least with nicer weather we might venture out to our yards to dig in the dirt a little bit and plant a few flowers or seeds. The Covid19 pandemic has now lead to the cancellation of this academic year for children and youth and they will return to school in September. This is difficult for children and youth because they have grown to care about their teachers who have nurtured them, shared with them the lessons they must master and to hear their ideas about life. In their elementary school years, my sons each brought a small gift to their teachers at about this time. It was a potted perennial plant of “forget me nots’. Little blue flowers which would return each spring if carefully planted and cared for. This gift was for the teacher who had opened their minds and hearts to learning with a kind thank you with the hope that their teacher would not forget them.

After Jesus’ resurrection, he appeared several times- in the garden where his tomb was empty, in the upper room where the disciples had hidden out of fear, and on the beach where he ate fish cakes with them one morning. According to both Luke’s gospel, and his record of the Acts of the Apostles, the story of Jesus ascension is shared. In the gospel reading Jesus takes them out of the city of Jerusalem, near Bethany, and he lifts up his hands and blessed them. While blessing them he then withdraws from them. A cloud takes him out of their sight and he is carried up into heaven. The disciples are gazing up toward heaven when two men in white robes stand by them. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This

Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” So they worshiped Jesus and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. They knew that they would never forget Jesus. It would now be their task to tell others.

When Jesus ascended into heaven the disciples were joyful but also saddened. Their Saviour was not going to be physically with them every day but they knew he had fulfilled his purpose to enable everyone to be reconciled to God and offer the gift of eternal life. It was now going to be their work to carry on Christ's mission and they knew that they would not be alone. They were to do the task that Jesus placed upon them and they had something to look forward to a new way of life would begin for them soon because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and the gift that Jesus gave them when he ascended into heaven was hope. The disciples needed only to be patient for this new life to begin. They showed no signs of grief as Jesus ascended into heaven, but truly glorified God for being witnesses to the messiah, the saviour and as they served him while he lived on earth. They did not mourn his leaving- they knew he was alive with God the Father. Now they just needed to wait and be patient for what was to come.

As Canadians living in this COVID19 pandemic period of time, we are enduring a moment of history like no other. We know that phase one of the province reopening is slowly being rolled out. Some businesses are able to open with specific conditions and precautions being put into place. We need to realize that we are facing a new way of life for the next few months and even into the next year because the world has changed and our future will not be as it was in the past. Businesses have moved to a virtual presence; online shopping and curbside pickup has become commonplace; people are working at home and those who do work out of the home yearn to be at home as often the workdays are shortened. Manufacturing companies are still trying to figure out how to implement social distancing protocols and we are now hearing of some stores and restaurants closing their doors for good because they cannot make up for lost revenue. We are also looking in our homes and figuring out what is priority in our lives and how what was once important is no longer. How we are maintaining and building relationships is foundational to who we are right now and this is driving us to connect virtually more than before. Because we are human, we need to get and stay connected to those people in our lives who have and will continue to make a difference.

But what are we to do now? As faithful followers of Jesus who ascended in heaven and sits on the throne of grace with God the Father, we must do what we are called to do. After Jesus' ascension into heaven, the angels dressed in white, asked the disciples what they were

doing as they stood around and stared off into space. What were they to do? According to our reading, the disciples went back to Jerusalem and gathered in the upper room where they had been staying. As a group they devoted themselves to prayer. With them were some women including Jesus' mother, Mary and his brothers. They prayed not really sure of their future, not really sure of what or how their tasks would unfold. But they prayed.

In our current time, we are like the disciples in this period. What are we waiting for? What might we do? No matter how we feel- helpless, alone, lost, joyful, anxious or even content- we can pray. We know our world needs prayer- for healing, understanding, strength, endurance, and clarity of purpose. We also know that people in our world are struggling with uncertain futures, job loss, grief and mourning, and mental health issues, drug addictions and finding the basic necessities of life. And we also need each other so we must pray for each other as the gift that Jesus gave the disciples is also available to us- hope. We must pray that others will experience this hope.

When we look around we see new life abounding. Winter wheat crops are growing taller, flower blossoms are on strawberry plants and fruit trees, gardens are beginning to burst with colourful flowers and life is being celebrated in innovative ways! We are welcoming babies through gifts and window visits. We are sharing birthday celebrations virtually and with music to thrill others' hearts and the assembly line of production is starting to move forward. The line may move like before but the preventive health measures are put in place for all workers and the end product may not be just vehicles. What is now being made locally instead of auto parts and alcoholic drinks are hand sanitizers, hospital gowns, and face shields.

There is life and we are reminded that life will continue to unfold in new ways much like the transformation of the caterpillar to butterfly. The caterpillar slowly walks and sits upon its source of food. It must eat a lot to prepare itself for its cocoon /chrysalis stage. Once in this protective casing there is a waiting period of time. What occurs inside is beyond our ability to recreate. Yet what emerges is no longer a many legged creature which slowly moves and eats but a new creation able to freely fly. With brightly coloured wings the butterfly begins its new life.

As we reflect on Jesus' ascension, we realize that in that moment he was lifted up into heaven, it was the end of his ministry on Earth in human form. But what followed has enabled us to begin anew. Christ still intervenes for us and is central in preserving the relationship between God and God's people. No one can condemn those who are in Christ. We have salvation because of and through Jesus because he is the One who acts like our high priest,

advocating for us to God the Father. This enables the new covenant Jesus began at his death and it is through him alone that we are given hope for eternal life. Paul writes, "Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:39) We must have this hope within us in order that we may share it with others. There will be better days to come. The question we must ask is, "Are we doing what we need to do for the new world which will emerge? Are we praying earnestly and focusing on the prayer Jesus offered with hope in our hearts?"

What the future holds is in God's hands and it is something different and new. We pray that all will be well but we must fully trust in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is the One who made us; the One who saved us and ascended into heaven to prepare places for us all and the One which dwells within us as our advocate and guide. Are we willing to glorify God and continue to live out Christ's prayer? May we truly be one with each other and one in God.

Let us pray:

Holy God of grace and hope we praise you and glorify your name as you call us through this time of uncertainty and lead us into our future. We praise you because you are in control of all of life. We pray that we might be free to fly to you as your new creation forever set free to live with hope. God of wonder and joy we pray through our Risen Saviour that all may be one. Amen.

Let us sing "We are One" 402 VU