

Easter 7 Sunday after Ascension John 17:20-26

Today in the church year is a day of waiting, a time for reflection, a time to stop, to ponder, to listen quietly, to pray, to feel, to experience, to wait and to wonder. In the sequence of things, last Thursday was Ascension Day, the day Jesus rose into heaven, and next Sunday is Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit visits the disciples with power. Today, though, is a waiting day, a day to reflect upon all that Jesus had said, all that he had taught, all that he had done. It seems to me to resemble Holy Saturday. The disciples at this moment felt confused, felt alone, felt lost, were wondering what was going to happen next, were wondering if this was the end or just a beginning as Jesus had promised. They probably felt frightened, alone, insecure, amazed, and perplexed.

They had just seen Jesus rise into heaven, they had just seen their friend, their teacher, their Lord go away from them. This was a glorious event, for now they were certain that Jesus was with the Father, now they knew for sure that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, now there could be no doubt that Jesus and the Father were really one. But on the other hand, now they were alone, without their friend, without their leader, without their companion. Yes, today in the lives of the disciples was a day that was really in-between times, between the time when they had Jesus with them, and before the time when they would be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. This was an awkward time for the disciples. It was a time for them to think about the words of Jesus, to dwell on his teaching, to recall his promises for them.

So what were they to do while they waited for the Holy Spirit, the power from heaven which was promised to them? According to today's gospel reading Jesus left them with the knowledge that everything which had happened was part of the Father's plan, and he prayed for them, prophetically, that they would remain united in all the turmoil which was to come.

It seems, then, that it was important for Jesus to know that they would be together, supporting one another in his absence and working together. In some respects the Church we have today full of committees and group leadership is based on the apostolic model because although leaders emerged such as Peter and Paul, there were many occasions in their ministry where they consulted other apostles on certain issues. Church by committee is based on a biblical model.

The reason for this is explained in St Paul's letters. Paul goes into some detail about how a church community should look. It should contain people with differing gifts, all working under the same faith, the same baptism, the same God but bringing to their work different talents and experiences. Paul goes on to express his intention that he is not looking for a church full of identical people, we are not clones. Rather he wishes to encourage a church of equality without uniformity. A place where people are valued in equal esteem for their input while recognising that everyone has different gifts to offer.

Each church in our diocese works within its own tradition, culture and environment, just as Anglican diocese work autonomously all over Australia and indeed throughout the world. This makes Anglican churches come in many shapes and sizes and in some places would be unrecognisable to us. However, they are all Anglican, the basic tenets of faith, baptism, church order and relationship with God are the same, and we are all working towards bringing about the kingdom of God through our mission and ministry. We are all equally important yet not identical or uniform.

Even closer to home I'm sure we can think of examples of the differences that exist among the people of our own parish yet somehow these differences can be harnessed and used to achieve great things. If we all enjoyed the same activities and wanted to do everything in the same way our church community would become very inward looking. It is because we are different and have different ideas, likes, dislikes and experiences that we have such a diverse community in our parish and so much is achieved in Christ's name

But, despite the diversity there is one thing that holds all the activities and people together, the Church. They are linked to the church and take place as part of the ministry and mission of this parish. We are following Paul's pattern by being equally important without being identical. The danger arises when we forget that each element – not just the bits I do or you do – are vital to the church community. Having been given different gifts we have been called also to use them in God's service and preventing others from using their gifts is not really embracing the spirit of a diverse Church.

It happens that church communities have difficulty with this issue all the time. People falling out with one another over all sorts of issues in and sadly sometimes this can lead to people leaving the church all together. When this happens we have missed the point of Christ drawing people together to work in this way. It is not only a practical solution to running a big organisation, being church is first and foremost an expression of our love for God and the playing out of Christian community relationships is an exercise in maturity of faith. Paul touched on it when he said we should not be like infants rather we should be fully mature adults. Furthermore, reading so often in Paul's letters his advice for smooth running churches reminds us that from the very outset Christians disagreed about so many things. What has kept the church working for the last 2000 years or so is what we have in common – love of God and faith in Jesus Christ, and an acknowledgement that we cannot do it alone.

We not only need the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we also need one another, our fellow Christians, to work with us like the first disciples did. Like them after the ascension we do not have Jesus in bodily form sitting among us telling us what to do, we have to rely on the promptings of the spirit and the prayers, advice and support of each other as equally important Christians in the sight of God with different but complementary talents and experiences to share. Let the words of Jesus ring true today as we pray that we may all be one, in Christ.