

Reflections on the Readings for the 6th Week of Easter

Sunday of the 6th Week of Easter – Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; 1 Pet. 3:15-18 & Jn. 14:15-21

The to-ing and fro-ing between the Sunday and Weekday Readings can be rather confusing a times. On weekdays we are much further on in our journey through the Acts of the Apostles. This Sunday, however, we go back much earlier in the account of what happened in the early days of the Church. At the beginning of the account Jesus instructed his disciples, *“to be my witnesses both in Jerusalem and throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.”* (1:8). The overall structure of Acts bears this out precisely (if you accept Rome at the end of Acts as “the ends of the earth”!). The account begins in Jerusalem, moves out to Judaea then, in this passage, the Gospel message reaches the Samaritans. We already know from the Gospels that Samaritans were despised by the Jews as being “pretend” Jews.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk.10: 29-37), the story of the Ten Lepers only one of whom, a Samaritan, returned to thank Jesus (Lk.17:11-19), and the account of Jesus talking to the Samaritan Woman at the Well (Jn.4:1-42) would all have been quite shocking incidents to those who originally heard Jesus’ words and witnessed his actions. Now, however, the Samaritans are welcomed into the new community without much fuss at all!

We are now at the heart of 1 Peter in our Second Reading and the call is that everyone should, “have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.” Remember that these are people who are in grave danger because of persecution. Whatever their situation, however, they are still called upon to offer their thoughts, “with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience”. In the middle of this pandemic people may ask us about why we are people of hope. We need to have our answers ready and be prepared to offer them “with courtesy and respect” just as Jesus, himself did and those recipients of Peter’s letter are asked to do.

Today, only two weeks away from the celebration of Pentecost, we have the first mention in these Last Supper Discourses of someone called the “Advocate”, sometimes rendered as “Paraclete”. The word has its roots in the person speaking for the defence in a court of law. Jesus is promising someone on our side once he has gone back to the Father. Perhaps the most comforting promise then, and now, is, *“I will not leave you orphans; I will come back to you.”* Whatever else may be going on in our lives the Lord never abandons those whom he loves: ourselves and all God’s People.

Monday of the 6th Week of Easter – Acts 16:11-15 & Jn. 15:26–16:4

All seems well as Paul begins to preach on mainland Europe for the first time. Notice the narrative is written in the first-person plural (“we”). It is clear both here and in other passages that Luke himself is accompanying Paul on this part of his mission. A key convert, Lydia, opens her door to Paul and his companions. Things seem to be going well, but all is not right, as we shall hear tomorrow.

Continuing his words about the “Advocate”, today Jesus tells the disciples that this “Spirit of truth” will witness to all he has told them because they, in their turn, are to be witnesses, that is people who share the Good News with others. It will not, however, be all plain sailing. Trouble will come their way but now that they know this, they will remember that he had warned them about this. The “Advocate” will be their helper and counsellor whatever happens to them.

Tuesday of the 6th Week of Easter - Acts 16:22-34 & Jn. 16:5-11

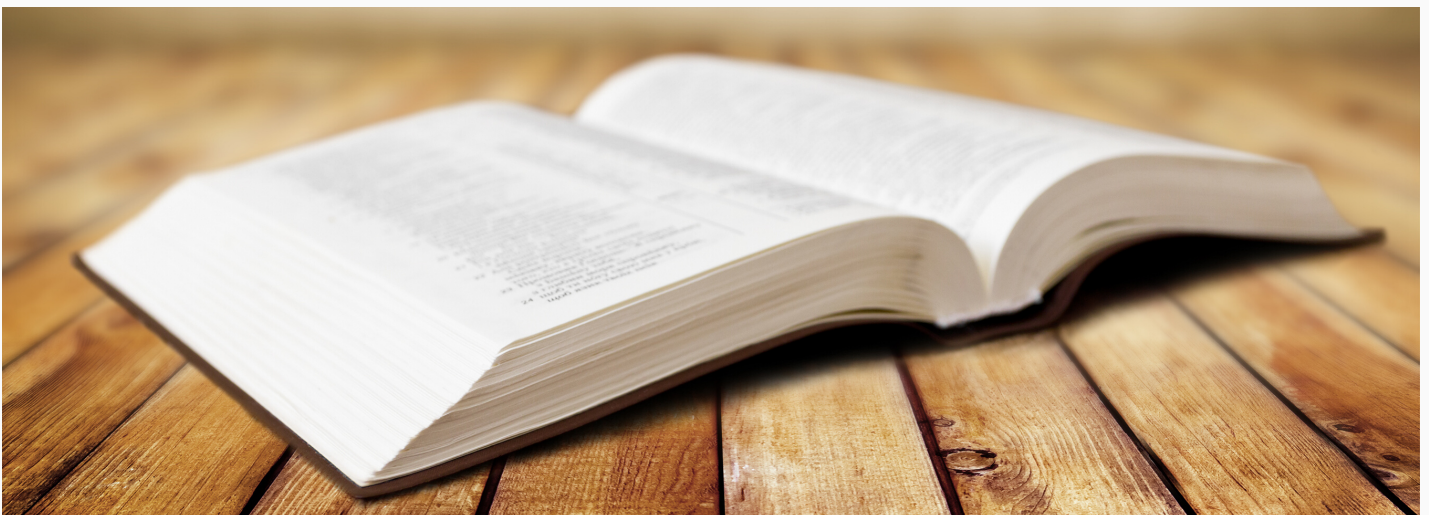
We have missed out six verses between yesterday’s Reading and that of today. In heading off to Lydia’s home the Paul and his companions rid a young girl of the demon who possessed her. She had been involved in some fake prophecies that made a good living for her parents as they paraded her around looking for gullible people who wanted their fortunes told. In one simple act they lose their livelihood and they are incensed! Now, having been denounced to the authorities, Paul and Silas are flogged and imprisoned, but by a miracle they are freed, and their gaoler is brought to faith having witnessed what happened. Their experience was a terrible one, but it had a very positive outcome, as the Gospel message makes further inroads, thanks to Paul’s preaching.

The disciples are now at a loss for words in our Gospel today. They do not know how to respond to what Jesus has been telling them. They are “sad at heart” but, Jesus goes on, somehow it is better for them that Jesus does go because this “Advocate”, that he has been talking about, will help them understand more deeply what he has been telling them about sin and judgment. It is very difficult for us to understand how it could be “better” that Jesus went away, yet that is what we will celebrate in two days’ time in the Feast of the Ascension. We are called to mature in our faith, to grow in this aspect of life as in every other. If Jesus were around all the time, as he had been up to now with the disciples, that would not be possible.

Wednesday of the 6th Week of Easter - Acts 17:15, 22-18:1 & Jn. 16:12-15

Again, much has happened between yesterday's Reading and today's. Paul and Silas were vindicated in Philippi, they then moved on and preached in Thessalonica (to which Paul would later address two of his letters, the first of which will be our first written Christian document). From there they journeyed to the great city of Athens where Paul addresses the crowd in the "Areopagus", the highest court in the city, just above the marketplace in the very centre, and a place well-known for debates between competing philosophies. Paul makes no reference to the Scriptures here. These Athenians know nothing of the Jewish faith, which they despised, instead he argues from belief in a single God. Telling them about Jesus in this way once he comes to talk about the Resurrection he is laughed out of court. The idea is too absurd for most, but not all, of these intellectual snobs. Some became believers after further discussion with Paul, but he is restless and moves on to the nearby port city of Corinth – a place that will be a great success for his preaching, but which will eventually become the bane of his life!

Jesus concludes his teaching about "the Spirit of truth" and makes the startling assertion that this Spirit, "will lead you to the complete truth". Although Jesus is himself the Way, the Truth and the Life, it will take time and reflection to digest everything that he said, and even more everything that is about to unfold in the next few hours. We know how, even after these words of Jesus, the disciples struggled to understand what was happening. A similar need for reflection on these events is necessary in every generation and in every new circumstance in life. The challenges we are facing today as we try to see what the world might look like in the next stages of this pandemic are inviting us to try to understand Jesus' words of hope in a new context, and to offer hope to those around us.



The Feast of the Ascension of the Lord – Acts 1:1-11, Eph. 1:17-23, & Mt. 28:16-20

Today we go right back to the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles for our First Reading and the account of the Ascension. Even now the disciples do not understand what is going on, “Lord has the time come? Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” They will need the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promises them. At that point they are called to be, “my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.” In the same Spirit we are the disciples of today called to make the same witness to the Good News.

Tom Wright, in his biography of Paul, asserts that this Letter to the Ephesians was originally a circular meant for a number of communities in the area, a copy of which was kept at Ephesus and hence the name. If this is the case, Paul is writing from his prison cell in Ephesus itself, and taking a step back and having a broad look at the message he has been promoting in his missionary journeys. Everything, as we read, is centred on Christ who is “far above” every other kind of power and authority. He is, “the head of the Church; which is his body”. We are all members of that body called to share this message with others.

You will notice that both our previous meetings have a missionary theme to them: the message of Jesus is to be taken to others. This theme reaches its climax in our Gospel, giving us the final verses of Matthew’s Gospel and the great missionary commandment, “Go, make disciples of all nations...” Our celebration of the Ascension, and the novena leading up to Pentecost, are rooted in the call to the disciples to mature, to take responsibility, with the help of the Holy Spirit, for preaching Jesus’ message to those around them. In essence this is the same call that we celebrate today.



Christi Himmelfahrt by Gebhard Fugel

Friday of the 6th Week of Easter – Acts 18:9-18 & Jn. 16:20-23

Events now move on at a cracking pace in the account of Paul's missionary activity. We hear that he spends 18 months in Corinth and faces problems with both the Jewish community and the authorities. It is a presage of things to come. He is accompanied by two female disciples as he returns to "Syria", via Ephesus and other places, at the end of his second missionary journey. There was obviously a great deal more to his ministry in Corinth, some of which we hear about in the passage leading up to today's reading, but more details about this community will emerge, of course, in his two letters written back to them a few years' later.

Jesus names the sadness and distress to be faced by the disciples but promises that it will turn to joy. He likens the process to a woman in childbirth. Those women who have experienced this will appreciate far better than the rest of us what is being said here, but even for 'the rest of us' witnessing at second-hand the joy of a couple with their new-born baby is a very powerful image of deep joy.

Saturday of the 6th Week of Easter – Acts 18:23-28 & Jn. 16:23-28

We have only jumped 5 verses in Acts but Paul has now been back in Israel, visited the disciples in Jerusalem, gone back to Antioch (his original base camp), travelled back through Asia Minor, including a visit to the "other Antioch", and pitches up again in Ephesus. Imagine how long all of that took walking all the way (apart from a short boat trip under sail)! This is now his third, and final missionary journey. Now we hear about Apollos who had been preaching about Jesus, but not the full message of the Gospel until further instructed by Paul. We come across this same Apollos in 1 Corinthians when Paul complains about the factionalism in the community, "I am for Paul, I am for Apollos, I am for Christ..."

Jesus is in full flow in our Gospel Reading promising all manner of help for the disciples in their forthcoming mission and it comes with the promise that he will no longer speak in "metaphors" rather it will be in "plain words". In our own reflections on these words we too receive all kinds of guidance from the Spirit, for whose coming we pray in these days leading up to Pentecost.



St Paul Preaching by Giovanni Ricco