

Sixth Sunday of Easter

JESUS PROMISES THE ADVOCATE

INVOCATION

+ In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

PRAISE

Jesus Christ, Lord of all,
given the name above every other name:
thanks and praise to you!

King of righteousness, King of peace,
enthroned at the right hand of Majesty on high:
thanks and praise to you!.

True high priest,
living for ever to intercede for us:
thanks and praise to you!

Wisdom of God, Word of truth,
fount of life and faith:
thanks and praise to you!

Source of our salvation,
you bring us to glory:
thanks and praise to you!

Come to your people now,
and turn our weakness into strength.
Thanks and praise to you!

Lord of life, I praise your holy name!
Alleluia! Amen!

PERSONAL REFLECTION

In your own words ask God to be with you in this time of prayer...

Then take a few moments to reflect on your life in the last few days, and in your own words speak to God about it, asking him to amend what is wrong, and to affirm what is good.

Then say:

Holy God,
holy and strong,
holy and immortal,
have mercy on me.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Risen Christ,
in the upper room you promised your disciples
that you would not leave them bereft:
send upon us your gift of the Spirit
that we may speak your word,
and draw others to the fire of your love,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

READINGS

Read: ACTS 17.22 – 31

The story of Paul in Athens before the Court of the Areopagus. Note how he takes something from the local culture as the starting point of his message. As you reflect on this, ask yourself if you were in his position today, what aspect of the 'local' culture today would provide a good starting point for a witness to faith in Jesus.

Say: PSALM 66

This psalm is a confident prayer of thanksgiving in the goodness of God. The psalmist thanks God for the gift of faith, and blesses him who did not reject his prayer, nor withhold his love

Read: JOHN 14.15–21

Continuing the account of Jesus' discourse after the Last Supper in which he says that he will not leave his disciples bereft and promises them the gift of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

REFLECTION

Wherever he went Paul met the local Jews in their synagogue and told them the good news of Jesus. Sometimes he was heard with interest, sometimes with opposition. At Beroea in northern Greece the Jews were 'fair minded' ... they received they received the message with great eagerness, studying the scriptures every day to see whether it was true.' (Acts 17.11) Many became believers, and some gentiles too, but Jews from Thessalonica, who were opposed to Paul, came and stirred up trouble. The converts at Beroea sent Paul off by sea to Athens, while his companions, Silas and Timothy, stayed behind. While he waited to for them to join him, Paul looked around – Athens was new to him, and like any other visitor, he wanted to get the feel of the city.

He would have made his way to the *agora* (literally 'gathering place'), the central public space in a Greek city, the centre of its athletic, artistic, spiritual and political life – the Roman equivalent was the forum. As he went he 'was outraged to see the city so full of idols.' He argued in the synagogue with the Jews and gentile worshippers, and also in the *agora* everyday with passers-by. Some of

the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers took issue with him, so they brought him before the Council of the Areopagus.

The Areopagus – a huge barren rock near the base of the acropolis – was a place of trial, and, in time, it came to deal with religious matters also. Here Paul was invited to defend his religious ideas. Walking around Athens, he had noticed an altar with the inscription: ‘To an unknown God’, and this gave him his *entrée*. Here was a heaven-sent opportunity to proclaim the God they did not know, the One, true God, the Father of the One Lord, Jesus Christ.

Paul began where people were and offered a new interpretation of their experience. He even quoted the Greek poet Aratus who, speaking of God, said that ‘We are also his offspring.’ This God, the One in whom we live and move and have our being, Paul declared, has come among us: the resurrection is the sign that authenticates this truth. The immediate response was, at the least, sceptical; at the worst outright rejection: some scoffed, others said he should come back another day.

The real issue was about the nature of truth. It takes us back to when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate. Generally we think of truth as reliable factual information, or as a firm theoretical foundation. This understanding is reflected in the Bible, especially in the Wisdom books, but more importantly the Bible also offers a deeper understanding of truth: the truth that lies at the heart of Jesus’ confrontation with Pontius Pilate.

Pilate was clearly disturbed by the man who stood shackled before him. He tried to discover if Jesus was making a claim to kingship: ‘So you are the king of the Jews,’ he said. In response Jesus replied: “‘King’ is your word. My task is to bear witness to the truth. For this I was born; for this I came into the world, and all who are not deaf to truth listen to my voice.’ Pilate responded dismissively, ‘What is truth?’ and terminated the interrogation. As so often in the fourth

gospel, two different understandings are juxtaposed: as Jesus is questioned by Pilate it is clear that truth means very different things to each of them. Pilate's response to Jesus is curt, which James Moffat brings out in his translation: "'Truth!'" said Pilate, 'what does truth mean?' Pilate's reply is not so much a question as a dismissal. His conception of truth does not go beyond the practical, the facts and realities with which he had to deal, like the angry crowd that faced him and the need to avoid a riot. Had he been an educated Greek he might have thought of truth in philosophical terms like the members of the Areopagus, but when Jesus speaks of truth he has in mind something different to the conceptions of both Roman governors and Greek philosophers. For him truth is personal, something lived, something given, the source of life and love. As he said to Pilate, he came to bear witness to the truth, and he did so in the way he lived. In his person the truth stood before Pilate, but Pilate could not recognise it.

The truth to which Jesus bore witness is the greater reality in which all of life and the whole of the created universe is enfolded. It is at one and the same time both ineffable and personal; it addresses us through the person of Jesus. It was Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road that changed his life completely. It literally turned him around, so that all that he had valued before, he now counted as just so much garbage (*Philippians 3.8*). Before his ascension Jesus promised that God would send the Advocate, the spirit of truth, to all who loved him and kept his commandments. Paul's testimony is the work of the Advocate. Jesus promised that he would be with us for ever; but he also said that the world could not receive him. This must be because the world does not love him, nor does it keep his commandments. One of the casualties is truth.

In a world of sound-bites, alternative facts and and fake news truth is in short supply; image and impression take centre stage. People

believe what they want to hear – we see this in the way support for Donald Trump holds up in a good deal of the USA despite his obvious failings. Truth is under assault today. It has been said that we live in the ‘post-truth society’, the product of post-modernism with its denial of any kind of absolute truth. Websites and social media feed us the things we want to hear, slanting the truth to suit a particular point of view. We should be alarmed at this. For Christians there is an objective truth; there are universal values; there is a common morality, which we believe to be God-given. These things are rooted in Jesus; he *is* the truth. Truth comes to us as a person rather than as a philosophy or a creed. As I said, when Pilate asked his famous question, ‘What is truth?’ the answer stood before him.

This is the truth of which St Paul spoke before the Areopagus. Jesus, he said, is the standard by which all will be judged; God made this plain by raising him from the dead. But this was too much for the Athenians, and the world today is not unlike ancient Athens. It’s not interested. It has its own ideas, its own religion – consumerism – its own ideas of salvation and morality. Many scoff at the idea of divine truth; the resurrection is simply unbelievable; if we’re lucky, some may say, ‘Come back another day.’

But for us the resurrection is everything. Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford, put it well: ‘The resurrection is God’s unqualified seal of approval of all that Jesus was and stood for. The authority with which he taught, his claim to forgive sins, the identification of his outreach to sinners with God’s love for us, his relationship of a son to the Father – all this is revealed to be grounded in God himself.’ (*Being a Christian*, p. 23)

Where does this leave us? In Athens Paul said: ‘God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent...’ We say that the Age of Enlightenment dawned in the eighteenth century, but for Christians it dawned

with the coming of Jesus, and for over two thousand years we have actually been living in the true Age of Enlightenment; repentance is the appropriate response for those who haven't seen the truth – or, to put it more accurately, have not been *grasped by* the truth. If we have, then God expects us to follow Paul's example, and to use the occasions that come our way to speak a word for Christ. In today's gospel, Jesus says he will not leave his disciples bereft, or orphaned; he says to them, 'I am coming to you.' (*John 14.18*) And he did, at Pentecost, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. We too, like the disciples and St Paul, have received the same gift, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. When we truly believe this things begin to happen. Like the disciples, we are able to overcome our fears and become apostles, no longer those who simply follow, but those who are sent. And in the right moment, when there is an appropriate opportunity in our conversation, the Advocate will help us say a word for Christ – a word of truth.

It's not easy, but like praying, it's something you just have to do in order to learn how to do it better. And I think it all comes down to whether we have allowed ourselves to be *grasped by* the truth. When the truth took hold of Paul it turned him around, and he urged his converts to follow his example, opening themselves to the truth. He would say the same to us: 'Follow my example. Let the power of the resurrection shape your lives and not your own convenience or advantage. Know that God's Holy Spirit is within you, and have confidence that he will guide you when the opportunity comes to say a word for Christ. You too are evidence of the truth of the resurrection when you let Christ shape your life.'

Pause and reflect.

PRAISE

We have a gospel to proclaim
Good news for men in all the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing His glory, tell His worth.

Tell of His birth at Bethlehem,
Not in a royal house or hall
But in a stable dark and dim:
The Word made flesh, a light for all.

Tell of His death at Calvary,
Hated by those He came to save;
In lonely suffering on the cross
For all He loved, His life He gave.

Tell of that glorious Easter morn:
Empty the tomb, for He was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share His victory.

Tell of His reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified;
He sends His Spirit on His Church
To live for Him, the Lamb who died.

Now we rejoice to name Him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing His glory, tell His worth.

PRAYERS

A time of free prayer and intercession. You may like to use the traditional five-fold pattern:

For the Church
*... that isolated and persecuted Churches may find strength and
courage in the good news of Easter.*

For the World

... for an end to war and famine, for food and shelter for those in need ... for a spirit of generosity between the nations.

For family, friends, neighbours and the local community

... for humility to be subject to one another, and at this time to seek the common good.

For the sick and all in need, near and far

... also for those who care for the sick at home, in care, and in hospital.

For those who have died

... and for those whose anniversaries occur at this time, and for those who grieve.

At the end:

Father of all,

send the fire of your Holy Spirit upon your people,
so that we may bear faithful witness to Christ;
in whose name I make my prayers.

Amen.

CONCLUSION

Our Father...

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, now and for ever.

Amen.