

THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

24th May 2020 – Sunday after Ascension Day (7th of Easter)

Welcome to this week's *Sunday Supplement*. For those who can access it, a service of Holy Communion is available on our YouTube channel from 7am Sunday.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMSD6J4ngi9rCe7kzY66Xfw>

The video includes an opportunity to share in the prayer for Spiritual Communion which is set out on page 4 of the *Supplement*.

READINGS & COLLECT

Acts 1:6-14

Psalms 68:1-10

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

*O God the King of glory,
you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ
with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven:
we beseech you, leave us not comfortless,
but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us
and exalt us to the place
where our Saviour Christ is gone before,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

Amen.

SUNDAY MESSAGE

Also available as the sermon in our video service.

In my homily for Ascension Day on Thursday (still available on our YouTube channel), I asked why the Ascension of Jesus into heaven was so important? Why is it not enough simply that Jesus died for our sins and rose again?

To summarise my conclusion in slightly different words to those I used on Thursday: we need to see the boundary drawn between the incarnate Lord, God among us, and the eternal Lord, God in Heaven. We need to see this in order to understand fully who Jesus is, and also how our relationship with the divine is going to be in the future.

The resurrection of Jesus is not the first occasion, even in the New Testament, on which someone is raised

from the dead. Not many weeks ago we heard the story of Lazarus being raised from the tomb, from John chapter 11. It isn't all that long since the lectionary set the raising of Jairus' daughter from Luke chapter 8. And on Friday, at Morning Prayer, the New Testament reading was the raising of the son of the Widow of Nain, from Luke chapter 7. You'll know that there are two or three raisings from the dead in the Old Testament, and a couple later, in the Book of Acts: Tabitha or Dorcas is raised by Peter; and of course Eutychus, whom Paul is really duty-bound to resuscitate, because his sermon has bored Eutychus so rigid that he fell both asleep and, consequently, out of a window.

We occasionally hear speculation about what happened to the people who have been raised. The implication must be that they go on to live a perfectly normal life and, in due course, die just as we all must. We assume that their particular interest for the authors of scripture ends with their resurrection, because they simply disappear from the storyline after the miracle.

One of the things I noted on Thursday was that Jesus, in his resurrection body, does a fair amount of appearing and disappearing. Although a demonstrably physical being, he does not seem to be limited by the locked doors of upper rooms. He appears and then disappears in the Emmaus Road story also.

It would not have been satisfactory for Jesus, who has been both the performer and the subject of miracles of resurrection, as well as countless other miraculous deeds and profound teachings, simply to have vanished or died again, after the resurrection. It would have been hard to know what to make of his promise to go ahead and prepare a place for us in Heaven, had he not been seen to have gone there. The only alternative would have been to stay on earth. I suggested on Thursday that we cannot have true freedom if we have Jesus standing behind us to confirm or forbid every choice we might make, from the smallest to the greatest. And if any one of us has Jesus physically with us, it seems to follow that no-one else could have the physical Jesus at the same time.

In returning to heaven, Jesus seems quite simply to be affirmed as God, metaphysical rather than physical;

supremely powerful and yet supremely available to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Jesus goes away in order that he might be more universally, intensely and individually focussed on each of us, in ways that are impossible if you are bound by the constraints of space and time.

If Jesus is now in heaven, where should the attention of faithful Christians be directed? It is tempting to think that our faith might be proportional to the attention we are prepared to direct heavenwards in worship and prayer. But the perfect balance is not to be found simply by gazing upon, or anticipating, the heaven to come – as the angels robed in white seem to say to the disciples. Don't stand looking after Jesus, they say: he has been taken up, and he will just as surely return.

The cue which the disciples take from this is to leave their gazing and to return to Jerusalem. For sure, we are told that they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. That's what we learn if we simply read to the end of today's passage. If we read on in Acts and the Epistles, we find that the disciples of Jesus quickly and confidently begin to model the human life of Jesus: they soon become powerful and effective in preaching, teaching and healing – even, on the two occasions that I mentioned, attaining to the heights of raising the dead. The trigger for their effectiveness seems to be the indwelling of the Holy Spirit with them, after Pentecost. They embrace the risen Lord, not holding on to him, not gazing after him, but embracing his present empowerment here on earth.

Our gaze, our life, should likewise be balanced: between regard for heaven, and regard for earth, as the lives of the disciples become balanced. Most especially, we need to allow ourselves to be open to the power of the Holy Spirit, to the possibility of having ambitions, dedication, potentialities which exceed those that we believe are possible for us. The problems of the world are legion and it is only human to doubt whether we can do much to heal them. But to believe that, in fact, we might do something, is the beginning of surrendering ourselves to the Spirit, surrendering our sense of limitation and our sense of self-entitlement – and instead becoming moved and motivated according to the divine will. Humility about our own abilities, accomplishments, possessions and status is a part of that journey towards being exalted in the eyes of God, as the author of First Peter writes.

This surrender to the Spirit is life in all its fulness. And life in all its fulness may be one with considerable comforts and many blessings. It may also be life with a considerable burden to bear. The surest way to avoid

problems is to be involved in as little as possible. The surest way to encounter opposition, is to try to make things better, especially where we challenge received opinion, or the way things are.

Today's reading from First Peter tells us not to be surprised if life is what it calls a "*fiery ordeal*", marked by anxiety and suffering. In our passage from John's Gospel, Jesus prays for the protection of those who have been entrusted to him. In the ancient world, making Jesus' name known often led to persecution and suffering of the most grievous kind. Thankfully, at least in this country, the most dangerous persecution is not a problem Christians face. The worst we tend to encounter is ill-informed and inaccurate criticism.

I noted this week a tweet by the well-known Canadian psychologist and atheist Steven Pinker. Criticising the premature lifting of lockdown in the US, on the footing that it was driven by evangelical supporters of Donald Trump, Steven Pinker said this: "*Belief in an afterlife is a malignant delusion, since it devalues actual lives and discourages action that would make them longer, safer and happier.*" I would encourage you to reflect on that comment. If your own life is testimony to its inaccuracy, then yours is a life already beginning to be empowered by the Spirit, to be more like that of Christ.

Suffering of all kinds, trivial and serious, marks the life of human beings. In the Ascension, we realise that Jesus is available to all of us, in good times and in bad, always and everywhere. In the Ascension, we realise that the Holy Spirit is coming to strengthen us. And, in the Ascension, we see our own eternal destiny in heaven – the promise of which, I hope, is a powerful reassurance and a powerful incentive not to give up the struggle to make things better in this life. Quite the opposite of what Steven Pinker suggests.

It's worth remembering that even Jesus' resurrection body bore the marks of his dreadful sacrifice. Those marks, however, were no longer a source of pain. Inspected by Thomas and the other disciples, they had become simply the proofs of passion; the mark of a life lived in the service of others. Our life ought to be marked by the same passion.

The Ascension then is a kind of beatitude. It is an assurance of blessing to all those who suffer for their faith, or for the righteous actions into which the Holy Spirit leads them. It is an assurance that keeps our focus firmly grounded, keeping us from simply gazing longingly into the heavens. It is an encouragement to a right life on earth, even as it is also a guarantee of an eternity in heaven.

NOTICES

If you need help that you can't get elsewhere, no matter what your age or circumstances, you can email duddoncommunity@outlook.com In Kirkby, you can phone Stephen Tudway (01229) 715259 or Linda Dean (01229) 889630. In Broughton and the valleys you can phone Stephen Tudway (01229) 715259 or Selwyn Wright (01229) 716797.

CLOSING PRAYER

*Eternal God, giver of love and power,
your Son Jesus Christ has sent us into all the world
to preach the gospel of his kingdom:
confirm us in this mission,
and help us to live the good news we proclaim;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

FOOD POVERTY

Regular readers will know that the Foodbank is now better supplied with food donations than when the crisis began and has asked that we direct our efforts towards toiletries and activities for children. This week's delivery (via local families that we are supporting directly) was a bumper one, as the picture shows. It included some 50 craft sets of various kinds, intended for primary-age children, as well as 'Charades for Children', a version of the popular game that can even be played by those who aren't yet able to read.



You may be aware that I use most of the cash donations I receive to purchase bulk foodstuffs and other goods from McClures of Windermere. Buying at wholesale prices makes our money go further, and it is easy to buy the large quantities that we need. It's also good to support a local business whose regular customers in hotels, pubs and restaurants have been significantly affected by the lockdown.

McClures deliver groceries to Broughton Square every Thursday. Through Gary McClure (Woodland), they have been very helpful guiding me around the hazards of catering pack sizes unsuitable for domestic use, and making special orders for goods, such as UHT milk, which the Foodbank has particularly needed.

Since they learned that I was purchasing for the Foodbank, McClures have also been generous in making donations of goods which are approaching their sell-by date. This week, their donations included 576 tortilla wraps in packs of 18, with about 14 days before their sell-by date. While 14 days is fine in a supermarket context, it is not necessarily possible to supply a large quantity to a commercial customer with such a short shelf life. These are perfectly fresh goods which, due to their bulk, might go to waste if they were not donated to someone who could immediately use them.

The Foodbank is unable to do handle fresh goods of this kind, due to the volumes they handle and pressure on limited volunteers, which is why they ask for donations of dry, canned and UHT goods. Please therefore continue to keep your donations in the foodbank boxes confined to items with a long shelf-life. (Unopened packets only, please.)

Nevertheless, having large volumes of goods with a shorter life available for free from McClures, it was worth finding a suitable outlet. The Foodbank kindly connected me with the foodbank run out of Spring Mount Community Hall in Walney. They are used to dealing with donations from supermarkets made at the expiry of sell-by dates. They were easily able to handle the significant quantities we had available, which are now finding their way to families all over Barrow and surrounding areas who depend on this support.

I'm really pleased to have found this new and efficient way to help people, reduce waste and obtain best value out of our charitable giving.

Thank you to all those who have been donated, once, twice or more to the work of the Foodbank. I am very happy to continue receiving donations and converting them into purchases. I hope that by doing so, we will continue to enjoy the generous additional support that McClures have been giving us, which we are able to pass on directly to charities engaged in the front-line work of feeding the most vulnerable.

NB. A few of you have kindly made donations in cash. This is fine as a lockdown measure but, if you can, please use a cheque or bank transfer. It is easier for me to account for such receipts, and cash is harder to spend when I am ordering and paying for goods over the phone or internet.

AN ACT OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

You may wish to set aside a space for prayer in front of a cross and/or candle, in a part of the house which is calm and comfortable and perhaps decorated for Easter.

The Act of Spiritual Communion is best used at the time of normal church services, or as a personal response after listening to a broadcast or livestreamed service.

Guidance appears in italics. You may wish to say aloud the words in bold type.

Introduction

Begin by making the sign of the cross and thinking of those who might otherwise be sitting around you in church.



**In the name of the Father,
And of the Son,
And of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

Reflection

Jesus is our high priest, tempted like us, yet without sin. He lives for ever in heaven to intercede for us. Through him we approach the throne of grace with confidence, and confess our sins.

*Jesus Christ, risen master and triumphant Lord, we come to you in sorrow for our sins, and confess to you our weakness and unbelief. We have lived by our own strength, and not by the power of your resurrection. In your mercy, forgive us.
Lord, hear us and help us.*

*We have lived by the light of our own eyes, as faithless and not believing. In your mercy, forgive us.
Lord, hear us and help us.*

*We have lived for this world alone, and doubted our home in heaven. In your mercy, forgive us.
Lord, hear us and help us.*

May the God of love and power forgive us and free us from our sins, heal and strengthen us by his Spirit, and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Word of God

Read one or more passages of scripture, perhaps the readings set for the day. Today's readings can be found listed earlier in this Sunday Supplement. You may wish to read the sermon.

Prayer

Begin with the Collect. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to the needs of the world, our community, family and friends and to the prayers you ought to offer for them.

Spend time in silence to reflect on the issues raised in the readings or the sermon and apply them to your own life.

End with the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven... or

Our Father in heaven...

Prayer for Communion

This prayer may also be used at the appropriate point while watching a live or recorded service of Holy Communion.

**Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.**

(After the prayer of St Richard of Chichester)

Closing prayers

God of our salvation, you have restored us to life, you have brought us back again into your love by the triumphant death and resurrection of Christ. Continue to heal us, as we go to live and work in the power of your Spirit, to your praise and glory.

Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

The Lord bless us, and preserve us from all evil, and keep us in eternal life. Amen.