



Parramatta
Mission



uniting
church
in AUSTRALIA,
Synod of NSW & ACT

Easter to Pentecost Reflections 2020

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Uniting Church in Australia

The Season of Easter commences on Easter Day and extends 50 days until Pentecost. On the fortieth day is Ascension. Every Sunday of the year is celebrated as Easter, as the resurrection of Jesus. This year the Pastoral Team will be providing a daily Bible reading, reflection and prayer to assist our members in their daily devotions. In the Acts of the Apostles, 2:41, Luke writes that the Christians “continued steadfastly to the apostle’s teaching and in community, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers.” Faith is a gift of God which is received in obedience. That obedience is expressed in nurturing the gift of faith, in living the Christian life with the whole of our life for the whole of our life. These reflections are our humble contribution to encouraging and nurturing our church in the faith.

Blessings, The Pastoral Team

Reflections will be written by:

Rev Dr Clive Pearson

Rev Dr Manas Ghosh,

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Acts 7 : 55– 60 - Monday 4th May 2020

⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

Reflection

We have become well-used to talk of ‘heroes’, ‘celebrities’ and various ‘award’ ceremonies. It is rather intriguing to place this contemporary cultural practice alongside the story of Stephen to be found in the book of Acts. His name (Stephanos in Greek, Sitiveni in Fijian) means ‘a wreath’, ‘a garland’. ‘a crown’. It presupposes fame, a reward and the bestowal of honour. In this particular instance, though, Stephen is remembered as the first martyr of the Christian faith. The word ‘martyr’ comes from a Greek word meaning to bear witness. Stephen had been chosen as one of seven Hellenists (Greek-speaking followers) to ensure the fair distribution of food among the widows in the infant church. His skill and wisdom in explaining the new faith had led some in the synagogue to initiate proceedings against him on the grounds of blasphemy. It is the same charge that the High Priest had laid against Jesus. The penalty for blasphemy was stoning, not crucifixion. Rather than the acclaim accorded to heroes Stephen’s witness and his death demonstrate a cost to discipleship. In the face of rage Stephen imitates Jesus in the forgiving of sins and asking God to receive his Spirit.

Let us pray: *If and when we find ourselves on the receiving end of frightening rage, enable us, O God, to maintain the integrity of our faith in Christ Jesus.*

Clive Pearson

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 - Tuesday 5th May 2020

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

1

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.

2

Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.

3

You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

4

take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.

5

Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

15

My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

16

Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.

Prayer:

Strong fortress.

Mighty rock.

Place of refuge.

Righteous.

Delivering hand.

Shining face.

Saviour and Redeemer.

Faithful.

You, O God, are for us

You, O God, are with us

Now and forever.

Amen

Sarah Bishop

1 Peter 2:2-10 - Wednesday 6th May 2020

² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵ like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

⁷ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner,”

⁸ and
“A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Reflections

In this text Peter is a paediatric dietitian, an architect and an ethnographer, all rolled into one. He wrote this letter to several churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire to bolster their faith when they were suffering from various trials and afflictions.

To those fearful and weak, Peter the paediatric dietitian's prescribes: just as a baby hungrily slurps a bottle of milk, in order to grow and develop well, so Christians need spiritual food that is fundamental for their spiritual growth and endurance, especially in the midst of hostile environments. The spiritual milk is the living Word of God. In our times of trials and suffering, Peter's advice remains the same, dine deeply the words of God for comfort and strength.

To those churches suffering tribulations and hardship, Peter the architect's encouragement: Fear not, for Christ is the corner stone of the church. This stone was rejected, even destroyed on the Good Friday, but God raised him and made him the sure foundation of the church on earth. In times like ours when the churches are just empty buildings we are reminded that the same crucified and risen Jesus remains the sure foundation of Christ's church, and we must remain fitted with him and must not lose hope.

Finally, Peter the ethnographer reinforces this even further by giving followers of Christ a new identity: “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people”. This is not to become jingoistic or supremacist of any racial, religious or political persuasion. But people who have been called out of darkness into his marvellous light, to be a light to the world. This new identity doesn’t put us on a pedestal, nor confers upon us any privileges, but empowers us to stoop down and serve the last, the least and the lost, as did our Servant King Jesus Christ. Breaking down all sorts of barriers that keep people away from one another when we accept the role of servanthood as royalty, we become God’s own people.

Manas Ghosh

1 Peter 2:2-10 - Thursday 7th May 2020

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹² Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. ¹³

¹³ For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, ¹⁴ whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. ¹⁶ As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. ¹⁷ Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. ¹⁸ Fear God. Honour the emperor.

Reflections

The epistle of 1 Peter is a remarkable text. It has some parts that do not travel so well across time but it is a letter, nevertheless, that abounds in hope and joy. It does so despite the fact that the members of the churches for which it is written are undergoing significant suffering. Whether that was from neighbours who simply do not understand their beliefs and practises or the consequence of some imperial persecution is not clear. They are a people who are living in diaspora: they are described as ‘resident aliens’; they belong to two cities – the heavenly and the earthly. They are being called to live out their lives in a way that is appropriate to their calling in Christ, their participation in his continuing sufferings and as citizens of heaven. It is the kind of epistle which will invite us to consider our citizenship, our culture, our ethnicity from the perspective who were are being called to be in Christ. It is not an easy task but it is one which is reckoned to lead to freedom: there is more joy in this epistle than any other despite the most references to suffering.

Clive Pearson

Acts 6:8-15, Friday 8th May, 2020

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁸ Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit^[a] with which he spoke. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. ¹³ They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth^[b] will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." ¹⁵ And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Reflection

Stephen had become an important part of the new community of Jewish Christians. He had been chosen as one of 7 to help distribute food to the widows. It was his personal qualities that marked him out as special. He was "full of grace and power", a man whose own spirit was infused with the Holy Spirit that gave him great wisdom. Here was a person whose life was transformed by his faith. The group of Freedmen were Jews who had been enslaved by the Romans and later set free. They were fearful of anything or anyone who might draw the attention of the Romans. Just as Jesus had been seen as a threat by the powerful, so a similar pattern is being played out in Stephen. We see here how a life lived in the wisdom and freedom of of faith often clashes with those whose beliefs and culture do not actually free them but still enslaves them.

Prayers: We pray, O Christ, that, we may be open to your Spirit, our hearts may be focussed on you, our lives be guided by your wisdom so that we may speak your truth to power.

Mary Pearson

John 14 :1-7- Saturday 9th May 2020

1 Jesus said, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. 7 If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you know him and have seen him. (Translation by Keith Hamilton)

Reflection

Chapter 13 through chapter 19 of John's Gospel is what is known as the farewell discourse. It is a discourse, last instructions or teaching, about living the Christian faith in the absence of the earthly Jesus. Today's passage follows immediately on from Peter promising to lay down his life for Jesus, and Jesus predicting that Peter will deny him three times. When we are under pressure, we have a choice to go deeper into God, to more diligently keep the daily practices of morning, noon and night prayer and reading of the scriptures, or to let things go. Letting go leads to chaos. When I sang in a choir, the choir director would remind us that when the piece became complicated, or when it seemed we were losing our way, to watch him more carefully because his beating of the time would become sharper and more deliberate. In a sense we were to lean in with greater attention. A note on the word truth. In the Greek the word for truth is a compound which literally means 'not concealed.' Jesus is the one who 'un-conceals' or is the revelation of God. This revelation, this un-concealing way is through the cross and resurrection. John's Jesus is saying that when we are in a difficult place, a challenging time, to lean in closer, to follow him more closely, to look for his way, truth and life. Like much of John's Gospel, future and present are meant at once. "In my Father's house" refers to both a future place of rest as well as a present safe place of refreshing. Like an oasis in the wilderness, the Father provides through the Son places where people can be refreshed in this life. The encouragement is to look for such places. Our daily prayers can be an oasis, a place of refreshment because they open up to us the riches of God's grace and thus enables us to remain faithful and have life in its fullness even in the midst of the most difficult of times.

Prayer: *Gracious God, provoke us to maintain the disciplines and practices of the faith, even in difficult times. Amen.*

Keith Hamilton

John 14:8-14 - Sunday 10th May 2020

⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me ^[a] for anything, I will do it.

Reflection

Many years ago, I remember driving to another Theological College. Outside there was a man who looked like the gardener. He was standing there raking the leaves. A short while later I was in a lecture with one of Australia's great Missiologist, Anthropologist and Theologian Father Cyril Halley who also lectured in Peace and Ecology. As he walked in he looked a bit familiar but I didn't think too much of it. It turns out that he was the person I mistook for the gardener. Looking back I see even though I didn't make the connection, I was not alone. Here Phillip is trying to make the connection between the personal experience he had of the living, breathing Jesus with the God who seemed a little bit far away. Phillip, like us, was having trouble making the connections.

Here Jesus makes it quite simple. If you see me, see what I do and know me, then you know the Father. We are the same.

In this time of physical distancing where everything seems so strange we could be forgiven for not making the connections. Yet we have experience of Jesus in our lives in and through other people- and through each other. Jesus' acts were those of love- of bringing life and compassion to others. He did this in what he said and in what he did. Perhaps we have also experienced acts and words of love from other people. Perhaps it is these which give us a greater glimpse of God. Perhaps in our own acts and words of love we might also build people up and in doing so help them to see and experience God who is at work in us.

Christine Bayliss Kelly