

St Peter's, Ealing
Thursday 30th May 2019
Ascension Day Mass

The life and work of the disciples is so full of missed opportunities and wrongly directed questions. There is the occasion in Mark's gospel (Mk 9.14-29) when they were unable to heal a young boy possessed. Jesus was returning from Mt Tabor, the transfiguration has been witnessed by Peter, James and John and now Jesus is confronted with a boy possessed of a demon. The disciples had been asked by the boy's father to heal him and they had failed. On another occasion the disciples get into a discussion about who is the best or most senior amongst them, who would sit at Jesus' right hand in glory. The disciples ask Jesus a few times when is he bringing about the new kingdom and they don't understand the whole passion story; they don't pick up, even when he is quite obvious, that he is to die and rise again. So when the resurrection happens they are incredulous and don't believe until Jesus comes to them again. Thomas a classic for this and I suspect is used in the gospel as the mouth piece for all the thoughts and words of the disciples at the time. This story of the Ascension is no different.

It opens with the disciples asking that political question again. Jesus has explained to them again what is happening. He is clear about their power to baptise in the Holy Spirit and so underlines the power of his teaching and the tenor of his words. Yet still "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?". How Jesus does not just walk off in despair I have no idea. The disciples are still glued to the idea that the coming of the Messiah was something to do with the political liberation of the nation of Israel from the hands of the Imperial powers. They have yet to grasp the Kingdom of which Jesus speaks is here and now already. It is a Kingdom that has always and will always be. As with the place of the Father, the Christ through whom all things were made and the Holy Spirit who gave life and breath to creation; so with the Kingdom that has no beginning and no end. That which has been open to all who truly turn to God has been made real in their presence...and yet they've not got it.

Are they so unlike us? We sit here today to celebrate that great day when the Christ returned to the right hand of God that he may intercede for us and open the path of righteousness and truth for us. We know the story and we hear the mistaken words of the disciples. You know for example that one of my favourite disciples is Thomas because he voices the questions we raise and does what we would like to do. Would faith be so much earlier if we could place our hands on the wounds and in the side of Jesus? I love Peter because again he gets to ask the words and make the mistakes we make in faith. We declare how much we love Jesus and then we go and deny him, or at least fail to proclaim him as Lord and Saviour when the opportunities arise.

The disciples have to work at their faith. I wonder if it wasn't a handicap to have actually known Jesus of Nazareth. It must have been so difficult in those last 40 days to completely change your world view thinking. Nothing comes back from the dead...unless they are a ghost. Yet here is Jesus who comes back from the dead and clearly not as a ghost, he can be touched, conversed with; he eats and he continues to teach. None of which could have made sense and yet all of which was happening. And then this, the culmination of the worldly ministry of Jesus the Christ happens. The questions asked by them show they were struggling to make sense of what was happening around them, for them this is only the beginning of what will be a very bumpy journey and they are grappling with this.

It is through their grappling though, as has happened throughout the gospels, that we get a chance to receive more information; time to stop and think. The teachings of Jesus were to do with our relationship and engagement with God. Throughout Lent we reflected through our classes and sermons on Encountering Jesus. We looked at how Jesus was encountered through the scriptures and we looked at ways we can encounter the Christ today; through prayer, through Bible study, through living our life of faith. Here then, is the ultimate question to be asked of all faith people, addressed to the 'Men of Galilee' but a question for us all. 'why do you stand looking up towards heaven?'

There is a temptation in the life of faith to look towards heaven for answers, to contain God in the heavenly realm, whether that be in church, in the sacraments, in our personal prayer. But surely if we are to truly live the life of faith in the Kingdom of the Father it has to be done so daily in our very walk of life.

The disciples were a bit gob smacked I suspect. It was the job of the angels to gently move them on, to nudge them into the next stage of their ministry, which of course is ignited at Pentecost. This story nudges us to see our faith as one without compartments, that should guide us and challenge us daily to grow closer to God, to live in the Kingdom that is here and now. We, like the disciples must now look outward into a world that so desperately needs the healing love of God and proclaim God's love as show us in Jesus the Christ, the Messiah who brings that love of God into the world that all may be one as he is one with the Father.