

Easter VII Sunday after Ascension

St. Luke's in the City

130518

Readings: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

Reflection

I received an email yesterday, from Lambeth Palace in London. The message, sent to our Christchurch diocese, was letting us know that our diocese would be prayed for this Sunday – at Lambeth Palace and across the world-wide Anglican Communion – by those who follow the Communion's Cycle of Prayer. I receive the Anglican Communion News daily, and the cycle of prayer by email each week, and what struck me as I opened it yesterday, was one word – 'Vacant'. Alongside the prayer listing of *Christchurch (Aotearoa, New Zealand & Polynesia)* – the word 'Vacant,' recognising of course, that we currently do not have a presiding bishop.

Likewise, in our *diocesan* cycle of prayer, we find the word 'vacant' alongside parishes currently without a vicar, including St. Luke's-in-the-City. What is your response to being described as vacant? This word *vacant* comes from the Latin *vacare* meaning *remaining empty*. Obviously, this refers to a particular role which is unoccupied, not filled - rather than the descriptors 'vacuous, expressionless or blank' as when related perhaps to a *vacant* stare!

But when a position or role is described as 'vacant' there is the implication of 'absence.' Absence of a presiding bishop...absence of a vicar. And this 'absence' is also a significant reality we are invited to engage with during Ascension-tide, the liminal waiting time we acknowledge between the Ascension of the risen Christ (the *absence* of the incarnate Word on earth) and the gifting of the Holy Spirit to the Church at Pentecost.

For the disciples, the despairing and terrifying absence experienced after the crucifixion and death of Jesus, and the unexpected and confusing absence encountered at the empty tomb, were in stark contrast to the absence experienced following the ascension of their risen Lord, as recorded by Luke (and described in the first chapter of Acts). Despair, terror, surprise and confusion are replaced following Christ's ascension with joy, expectancy, an emptiness awaiting spiritual fillingand constant prayerfulness.

‘When they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet... they went to the room upstairs where they were staying.....and were constantly devoting themselves to prayer....’

But that was then, and this is now. In a liminal time of absence (however that manifests in our lives), can prayer still reconnect us with the divine? In our own emptiness, ‘desert times’ or ‘dark night of the spirit’ we may ask, where did the risen Christ go? Did Jesus not say “I go to prepare a place for you...And you know the way to the place where I am going?” Jn 14:2,4

Theologian Hans Martensen has written: ‘The presence of Christ in the universe must be looked upon, not so much as actual being, but rather as an essential becoming; it must be treated as a progressive advent.....’

To contemplate the mystery of the ascended Christ as a process, shaping the interrelated destiny of everything that is, may prove a way to collapse the infinite distance between earth and heaven into a nearness, a presence, which can be known and experienced even if not understood. Wherever Christ went, it was to prepare a ‘place’—or situation—where we all may become our truest selves, completed at last in Christ’s glorified and expanded body.’

So how do *we* respond to absence in our lives? Perhaps the absence of a loved one, a family member or close friend? For me, with a husband currently working in Auckland, I value daily contact via text or email. It isn’t necessarily profound discussion but simple loving exchanges – acknowledging our love, our attentiveness to, and interest in one another, sharing moments both grave and humorous. Actually, it seems a lot like prayer! Maintaining loving relationship, sharing vulnerability, offering and receiving forgiveness, celebrating, sorrowing...seeking and offering guidance.....in so doing, we honour our humanity and recognise something of the divine essence – the essential becoming - within us.

In times of absence, prayer can encourage and guide us, comfort and calm us. That prayer might be a physical outpouring of despair, anger or frustration.... or still, silent attentiveness. In today’s Acts reading, Peter - through prayer - attunes to another absence and discerns the need to fill that absence with a new presence, replacing the Judas-space with an additional witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Prayerfully, in that liminal space, the eleven choose Matthias to join them in apostolic witness.

We are in a liminal space right now. In our Church calendar, between Ascension and Pentecost; in our Province and diocese, following recent General Synod decisions regarding same gender blessings; in our diocese between bishops; in our parish, between vicars. I am in a *personal* liminal space, between permanent homes. Perhaps you also, are in a personal liminal space....

Is it a place of presence or absence?

This past week in the Church calendar, we have acknowledged the fourteenth century mystic and theologian, Julian of Norwich. As a recluse, in the absence of worldly connection, Julian recorded her revelations of divine love. At her simple anchorage in Norfolk, reflecting on past visions focused on the passion of Christ and the holy Trinity, she wrote the following:

'I saw that [our Lord] is everything that we know to be good and helpful. In his love he clothes us, enfolds and embraces us; that tender love completely surrounds us, never to leave us.'

'[Christ's] will for us is that we should seek for and trust him, rejoice and delight in him, while he in turn strengthens and comforts us until such time as we realize it all in very fact. As I see it, the fullest joy we can have springs from the marvellous consideration and friendliness shown us by our Father and our Maker, through our Lord Jesus Christ, our Brother and our Saviour.'

Is this what Jesus was conveying to his first disciples, and to Julian of Norwich.... and to us, through the extended, deeply intimate prayer from Son to Father, offered in John's gospel (part of which we've heard again today)?

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.' (from John 17:6-13)

May we – this Ascension-tide, and in our current liminal space of vacancy and absence - as we seek a new bishop, as we work with change in our diocese following last week's General Synod decisions, as we await a new vicar, as we live with a vacant church site, and as we enter the week of Prayer for Christian Unity – may we, in this liminal space, be a loving presence to one another, seeking to 'be one' as Jesus prayed, and may we – like Julian of Norwich – 'know the tender love which completely surrounds us, never to leave us.'

In the name of our risen and ascended Lord, I pray. Amen.