

Epiphany 5 Yc 25 Homily

Please be seated, and a few moments to reflect. Let us pray. Lord God, Heavenly Father, as we reflect upon what we hear in the Scriptures and our lives, may we come to a deeper experience of the revelation given to us in Jesus, through him and the guiding of the Holy Spirit may we grow in love and be led into all truth. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

As Our hymns so beautifully spoke of, a fundamental theme of epiphany is the glory of God being manifest in Christ, manifest through his life, baptism and ultimately his death and resurrection and ascension.

It's a time that speaks to us of the great possibilities of human life that the coming of Christ brings to us.

Today, our readings focus on the calling of the disciples but also their later witness to the death and resurrection of Christ and, in Isaiah, the vision of God that is to come for us in our journey in Christ.

The calling of the disciples, when Jesus says, 'Come, I will make you fishers of men or fishers of people or catchers of people', we lose some of the poetic touch to be politically correct but it's always seemed to me that that is a wonderful foundation for us about ministry and yesterday, unfortunately, I wasn't able to make it to Scott Lowry's Concentration as a Bishop in the Church of God, but I did watch it on YouTube, live from St Paul's Cathedral and I'm sure it was a profound experience for all of those who travelled down, as it was for me, watching it on YouTube.

And of course, ordinations help us to reflect upon the very nature of ministry and so it's interesting to see that the disciples there doesn't seem to be any record of them going to a theological college or the equivalent in the Jewish context, they were fishermen and yet they became the chosen ones to be taught by Jesus. And there's a deep lesson, I believe, in that, the fishers of men or fishers of people because God took their fishing skills to use for their work for the Kingdom. In other words, they were good at catching fish and then they were able to start catching people, drawing people into the net of God's Kingdom.

And I think that says something to us, that all the earthly skills that we have and have developed in this life are in a sense to be used for the work of the Kingdom. Now they left everything and followed Jesus, and of course they were to be apostles, and so that leaves a little gap for us because people called into full-time ministry do, in a sense, leave a lot behind, perhaps not everything, but often do, but that's one form of ministry. The other form of ministry is how we are to live out our baptismal calling in the work we do, and I'm going to touch back into that in a moment.

It's interesting that I think this, to me, I think I thought to myself, this is going to be my year of the parallel Bible and although we're in year C, I'm going to keep looking at all the Gospel accounts that relate to each passage that we have on a Sunday. And if you look at the accounts of the calling of the first apostles, or disciples, that Matthew and Mark don't have the story of going out and catching a huge load of fish. John does not have this story at all, in a sense.

John's story of the calling of the disciples is different, and much more closely linked with the baptism. I'm just going to let you sit with the tension of that. But I guess one of the things that the Lucan account does show is that if God guides you in your work, you will work far more effectively, because guided by Christ, they are able to catch a huge load of fish.

And perhaps that says something for people, for their vocations in the world, whatever their occupation might be. If you live as a Christian and let Christ guide you, then in fact you will work far more effectively than if you didn't. And a society built up based on people being guided by Christ is something we can dream and hope for.

But John, by linking the calling of the disciples to the baptism of Jesus, I think reminds us about the importance of our calling, our baptismal life. Now, I could be wrong, but I have a sense that some people think that the great emphasis I'm giving to the baptism of Jesus with the idea of the Spirit coming down upon us and clothing us, and then the voice being heard from heaven, suggesting that that is a revelatory story of how we live in Christ, that we are to be clothed and the Spirit is to come down upon us and to clothe us, and somehow Christ is nurtured within us through this dynamic process and we grow in our communion with God who speaks to us from heaven. And this sort of emphasis on the descent of the Spirit, it was it the ordination yesterday. The actual words of ordination are, come down Holy Spirit, come down Holy Spirit.

It's very much a biblical term of the Spirit coming down upon us, and yet people seem to have a certain hesitance about embracing it. But for me, for somebody who's studied Eastern religions for a long time and seen it really focused on the teachings of the Kingdom of Heaven is within you, Christ is within you, and all that is true. But this idea of being clothed in the Spirit has been something I've only really come to at least in recent times.

Because I wrestle with the fact that it doesn't necessarily seem to be quite grabbing people's imaginations, would you believe that I had two dreams this week? Remember the Pentecost promise that young men will see visions and old men unfortunately old men, me, will dream dreams. I had two really profound dreams. The first, without going into more detail, was I was giving a sermon in a fairly big auditorium and I'd been chosen to give the sermon because they thought I could do the sermon.

But when I started to talk about the descent of the Spirit people sort of went, hmm, I was in a dream. The next one was even more profound because I was chosen to go into a role of ministry and part of the affirmation of that role of ministry was suddenly there I was with the Bishop and Heaven was opened and the light of God came down upon us affirming. So this descent of the light of God, descent of the Spirit, I ask you to pray into it because I think it is really profound and important and central to our Christian journey.

And why it's central to our Christian journey I think emerges as we reflect upon what is so central in our understanding of Christian faith. Paul's first letter to Corinthians, chapter 15. And because of the fact that we have, as I say in the introduction, we have a number of people preaching Sunday by Sunday and we're now going into 1 Corinthians 15 for the next few weeks. I've actually printed a few dot points about it and 1 Corinthians 15 as well for your reflection because 1 Corinthians 15 is at the heart of us understanding the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

To me it is one of the foundational epistles, chapters of any of the epistles that we need to reflect on and come to a deeper understanding of because it really shows us our journey in Christ into a new creation and a deeper faith.

It begins with Paul in today's reading pointing out that some people had experienced Jesus risen from the dead and they were witnessing the fact that they had seen him. And including that number is some 500, which is quite an amazing thing to think about.

But really we're in a different position to that because Paul said, alright, you can talk to some of them, although some of them have died, but we're not in a position to talk to live people now who saw Jesus rise from the dead. And so the resurrection takes on another perspective for us in our journey in faith because we seek for the Holy Spirit to reveal things of the depths of what it means for Christ to have died and have risen into new life. And in some ways Paul lists himself as being the last one that Jesus appears to.

But the interesting thing about that is that Jesus appears to Paul after the Ascension and after Pentecost. So in some ways that beautiful story on the road to Damascus where Paul hears this voice, Paul, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? There's this blinding light. It's a revelation of a new stage of how we experience the risen Christ.

Anyway, that's just a little pointer. So we've got those who knew Jesus in his earthly life, saw him risen from the dead, giving their testimony, and probably some of the 500 did not know him in his earthly life. But we have this amazing witness and then we move on as to what it actually means for us.

And this is where I think there's a very important development. After Paul's made his summaries of the resurrection experiences, he talks about himself as being the least of the apostles, and he says, 'now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from dead, how can some of you say there's no resurrection of the dead?' And this is really classic Paul. If Christ has risen from the dead, how can you say there's no resurrection of the dead? Because there was a discussion in Judaism would the dead be raised? If there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised.

It's an interesting thinking, isn't it? And if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamations have been in vain, but in fact Christ has been raised, so therefore the dead will be raised. And that's a very important point in the development of Paul's thoughts on the resurrection of Christ. He then goes on to talk about Christ being the first fruit, and this is where I think you're getting to what is so central to our understanding of the very foundations of the revelation of God in Christ.

Death came through a human being. Resurrection from the dead through a human being. As in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive.

As in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive. And there he's going on about all again. You'll come to realise that 'ALL' is one of my favourite words, because this passage is all about all.

And then he talks about how the resurrection will take place for each in our own order. All things will be brought and subjected unto Christ. The last enemy to be conquered is death.

And then he goes on to say all will be reconciled, that everything will be brought unto Christ, will be subjected to him, and then he will be subjected to the Father, so that God can be all in all. The ultimate purpose of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is so that everyone, all creation, no exceptions, will be brought unto Christ, enemies subjected to him, which is pretty sort of adversarial language. Subject to the Father, so that God can be all in all.

And then he goes on to, well he talks about being baptised for dead, and we won't touch into that today, but then he addresses a very important issue for us in our spiritual journey. What type of body are we raised in? And he talks about the physical body and the spiritual body, the perishable and the imperishable. That the physical body comes first, then the spiritual body.

The first Adam became a living being, the last atom became a life-giving spirit. But it's not the spirituals first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was of the earth, the body of dust, the second man from heaven, bearing the image as a man of heaven.

And then the dead are raised imperishable. Have you, and I hope all of you, as you're growing in spiritual journey, realised because of the way the spirit comes upon us and Christ works within us, that we do have a physical body and a spiritual body. And the age of all of us here, we should really be well into experiencing our spiritual bodies, and especially when we pray.

And this is partly why prayer at night is so important. And again, just like the disciples witnessed to their experience of the risen Christ, and if they didn't witness to what they saw, we wouldn't have the testament, would we? And that's one of the challenging things about Christians, is we need to witness to what we experience of Christ in our lives. If we don't talk of our living experience of Christ with people like I've just touched in those dreams, who's going to really know? I mean, as we grow in Christ, we need to speak of what our experience is.

So this is not me just saying, oh, you know, Bruce Charles, it just happens that part of my journey now, I've come to discover over the last few years, how important the spiritual body is. This particular cycle of thought began in Drouin in 2022, the booklet I mentioned, I actually printed there then. And coming to know our spiritual body and to experience this energy around us leads us to think of, you know, am I really my body or am I something else? Which then leads you into thinking, well, what is it in me that is eternal? How am I going to be imperishable? You know, like, my consciousness, what is it in me that's going to last forever? And that's where coming into experience, in fact, we have this spiritual body as well as a physical body, and in fact, as we get older, the spiritual body becomes more important, we have more time for prayer, we have more time to go deeply into that sort of thing, and one of the great benefits, and I'll just share one experience, 2.30 in the morning, one night, I was just like a pool of energy in bed.

I had lots of pain in my body, but while I was this pool of energy, I felt no pain because I was virtually at night in my spiritual body. So, letting the spiritual body grow in us is part of the divine purpose of God for us. And as we grow into this, we come into the new creation.

Just check in a moment. I need to start summing things up. When we talk about the resurrection and the evidence of the resurrection, we've got the biblical evidence, right? And we also have the testimony of the people of God throughout the ages, and ultimately, we have the testimony of all of humanity.

There's a scholar who's an Anglican priest in New Zealand who's done a summary of literature on near-death experiences, and he suggests that he probably doesn't think that people really experience heaven, they just experience being at heaven's door in some of these experiences, but he suggests that they are only possible because of the resurrection of Christ. So, when we look at this experience of humanity and the spiritual experience of people, this is where this further research has to be done historically, but it seems that you could argue that because Christ was risen from the dead, there are more and more people having these type of near-death experiences, and in some ways this is part of the revelation of God becoming more and more clear to us. And if you're not sure what a near-death experience is, it's usually where somebody dies on the operating table and is clinically dead for a period of time and they have an experience with God, but then they are brought back to life.

And because of the progress of modern medicine, there are more and more people having these sorts of experiences. Now, I'm not going to go in detail to what some of the philosophers say or James Packer who said, well I've got news for you, all I saw was darkness, and I said I've got news for you, that's what you'll see. Because he wasn't exactly the most godly man.

Anyway, that was a bit harsh, wasn't it? As we grow in our spiritual body, we start to see things more spiritually. We live in the spiritual dimension, we have our eyes focused on heaven. And things have happened, and we've just been through a death in our family, and there have been different ways that people in the family have been touched by Edith who died and sensed her presence, even though she had passed from our life physically.

And I've seen that in so many funerals where people have this sense of the person still being with them because really they've just gone to another room in God's house, the sort of things we say in the Holy Gospels. I mean, we are caught up in this deep mystery of coming to know what it is to have life beyond this life, and to live forever. And that's a wonderful journey that we're on as part of the new creation.

And Paul, I think, gives such a succinct, profound summary of that in 1 Corinthians 15, and God's ultimate purpose for how God will be all in all. And part of that process to conclude leads us into Isaiah for a moment. When you're at theological college, and I spent a bit of time being a fisherman before I did theological college, so I've got a bit of a balance of both, but I think sometimes what I learned outside theological college was more important than what I learned in theological college.

The interesting thing is that you hear these concepts, and you have a whole list of concepts that float around a particular subject. And one of them is by one of the early Church Fathers called Irenaeus, where he talked about recapitulation, where everything is to be recapitulated in Christ. So it's almost like with through Jesus' death and resurrection, we're now heading back to the Garden of Eden but in a newer, more profound way.

And all that happened that was broken is being, in a sense, redeemed and gathered into Christ. And so part of the journey like Isaiah, his vision, is now something that in Christ you don't have to be a great prophet like Isaiah. It's possible for us to have visions of God.

And there are people who expect that they might have some or have had some sort of vision of God, some sort of experience? And again, it comes back to the more we've witnessed the one another if we have, the more we will grow, because that's like if someone's had a vision, it would be great for us all to hear it. But I bet we're probably frightened to talk about them because people might think we've got tickets on ourselves or something.

But we are a community that's growing in faith in Christ together and witnessing to Christ now is at the heart of it. And so it suggests that Isaiah reminds us that we can have these amazing experiences with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. And so this journey that is being revealed through the manifestation of Christ to all people is ultimately summed up in his death and resurrection and how through the new life in Christ, the old Adam is passing away and the new Adam is coming into being.

As in Adam all die so in Christ shall all be made alive. So I encourage you to be mindful of that journey of the descent of the Spirit. Be aware and if you have some sense of the Spirit coming around you, accept it.

That's part of how we experience God and that's how we grow into a deeper experience of God in our lives.

Let's pray. Lord God, Heavenly Father, as we continue to pray as Paul prayed, give us your Spirit that will know you better.

Our hearts and minds will be open to see his light. And we might know the same power at work in us that raised Jesus from the dead. So as we grow into new life in Christ by living the dying, rising light, open our hearts and minds and we might see how you reveal the truth of Jesus having risen from the dead and the new light that you give to us and to all creation through him. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

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