

Seventh Sunday of Easter, (Sunday after Ascension) 24 May 2020**Lectionary reading:** Acts 1:6-14, 1 Peter 5, John 17:1-11

I wonder if you can remember the first time you were left alone at home – and I don't mean like Macaulay Culkin in the Home Alone movies! But you know, that first time you were left at home to look after the house when the parents went away. I can't remember the exact details now but I do remember my parents and younger brother going away for a couple of days and leaving my sister and I look after the home.

Although there was an air of excitement at the thought of some freedom, as I waved my parents "good-bye" I was also filled with a sense of sadness and fear, thinking: What if we do something wrong and burn down the house, what if my parents have an accident and never come back ...? I stood in the driveway watching them as they disappeared off into the distance.

Once back in the house though I was reminded of their love and care. They didn't leave us empty-handed. The cupboard was full of all the food we needed and more, and the freezer stocked with meals. I remembered their pep talk, the do's and the don'ts while they were away – no parties, no loud music etc. and to be sure to get on with one another – no arguments!

Stuck on the fridge was a list of instructions, a to-do-list to keep the house and garden in order, to feed and walk the dog and so on, and a list of telephone numbers to call in case of emergency. Our neighbour reassured us that she was there if needed. A huge comfort that we were not totally abandoned. We were fully equipped for the couple of days ahead.

This past Thursday, was the Feast of the Ascension. And while that feast is non-transferable, we still get readings and prayers referencing that event on this the seventh and final Sunday of Easter. So we have the chance to think a bit about the Ascension this morning.

The key verse about the Ascension in our readings is of course Acts 1:9, where Luke says that, after speaking to the apostles Jesus “was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

The apostles had been meeting together since the resurrection, originally trying to figure out what to do with themselves after Jesus died, but then revelling in his various appearances. For 40 days, according to Luke, the apostles spent time with Jesus putting the finishing touches on what they had learned over the past three years.

They'd just got used to Jesus once again being with them when he tells them that they are to be witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth; and then he is gone. The disciples can do nothing but stare into the skies as they watch him disappear, heads back, gazing up toward heaven – I can imagine more than a bit stunned, perhaps quite worried to stay behind – alone – without Jesus.

Yes, Jesus did affirm that he was not abandoning them. He was going to send them a helper and comforter, the Holy Spirit. But you know how it is when someone leaves – even if they have prepared you beforehand. Not exactly knowing what to expect, not yet knowing who the Holy Spirit was.

I wonder how long they would have stayed there like that if the angels hadn't appeared, interrupting their special moment and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’ Or to paraphrase the words of a commentator I once read – you can't just stand there! What do you think you are doing? Get going – you've got your commission, there's work to be done, there's life to be experienced, you've been blessed so go.

The temptation for the disciples – was to gaze at the heavens, to wait for a Second Coming, and forget their calling. But Jesus left so the story could continue. He knew what he was leaving, he knew who they were; the eleven with a pretty ordinary track record, who were very human and imperfect people.

The resurrection did not make them super people; they had no wings; even the angels had made sure they had their feet firmly on the ground. But they were now a people who had a purpose; a people who were called to “witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” letting the power of God's Spirit continue to write the pages of his-story through their lives, no matter how inadequate they felt for the task.

They will be the ones to live out kingdom goals. They will be the ones to help break down walls. They will be the ones to strive for peace. They will be the ones to proclaim what Paul would eventually write – that there is no more Jew

or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ. They will be the ones to help usher in the kingdom of God.

And now this same task has fallen to us. Today we find ourselves in the same place the apostles were on that day of Ascension. We live in the gap between the ascension and the fullness of time when all things will be restored in Christ at his second coming. Jesus is no longer physically in the world, but we are. We celebrate that Christ is present through us, his disciples.

We have received power by virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We are the inheritors of this mission to be witnesses for Christ in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The question is are we ready?

I hope so, because this is what the entire Easter season has been leading up to.

Jesus wasn't resurrected from the dead just so he could perform a few extra miracles and throw some fish on the barbie. He was resurrected to give Mary the courage to be an apostle. He was resurrected to demonstrate to Thomas you don't need to touch his body to feel his presence. He was resurrected to move Peter from trinitarian denial to trinitarian love. He was resurrected to move us from passive witnesses of his life to being active witnesses of his life, death, and resurrection.

I suspect that most of us feel ambivalent about being witnesses for Christ. For many at least, the word brings to mind manipulation; invading someone's space; being asked to talk about your faith to people who don't want to listen. The English clergyman, Michael Green, says it well in his book about Evangelism, which is one aspect of being a witness for Christ:

"Evangelism does not enjoy good press. It literally means the sharing of good news, but for most people there is little good news about it. It conjures up images of strident, perspiring preachers, of smooth-talking televangelists, or of strange characters at street corners urging the passers-by to repent and meet their God."

Yes it's good to talk about what Christ has done for us – but it's also about action! Being a witness for Christ is also to continue Jesus' ministry, one that shares God's love, cares for the vulnerable, loves one another.

We need to be willing to stand with the poor and oppressed. We are to endure persecution to portray his heart of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and love. We are to be his voice, to cry out against all forms of injustice. We are to be his hands, to invite the stranger in, feeding the poor, providing shelter for the

displaced. We are to be united in working for peace, loving our neighbour, forgiving and praying for our enemies.

That, you might protest, is a big job. It's so big that we may get overwhelmed by its bigness. Fortunately for us, Jesus provides us with a blueprint for action. He has shown us how to live. What is more we aren't being sent out without support. In John 17:11, Jesus prays for the protection of the disciples, and as we were told in last week's gospel we will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. We received that power at our baptism. We will be reminded of that power again next week on the Day of Pentecost.

It is time for us as a Church and as individuals to be the people God has called us to be, to live a changed life and to change the lives of others, maybe not quite in Judea or Samaria, but in City Beach and further afield, through the good news. How will you and I live out that commission?

Come Holy Spirit come!