

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 28th April, 2019 (Easter 2)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Acts 5:27-32

Psalm 118:14-29

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon: Paschaltide -the coming home of the Christian to the spiritual self

Today's readings from Scripture have an interesting chronology - its a bit like getting a book and reading the middle chapter before chapter 1! Our first reading today is not from the Old Testament - as usually is the case - but from Acts of the Apostles. Acts is part two of a work whose first half is the Gospel of Luke. Acts tells the story of the early church's rapid spread from Jerusalem to the rest of the Roman Empire. It begins with Jesus' ascension into heaven and then describes how the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit on the Feast of Pentecost. By the time we get to chapter 5, from which our first reading for today comes, a lot more has happened. Filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day, Peter has made his impassioned oration to the crowd of devout Jews from many nations gathered in Jerusalem, an oration which, we are told, cuts them to the heart. He says to them, "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." Cut to the heart, these gathered Jews ask Peter and the apostles, "What should we do?" And Peter answers, "Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." And we are told, 3000 persons were converted on that day!

Miracles of healing followed, and more impassioned speeches by Peter, calling for repentance and a turning to God. Needless to say, the Jewish high priests and the Sadducees were not impressed, and Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Council. Again, Peter's impassioned and bold speech confounds his listeners and they say to each other, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in his (Jesus') name."

But its a futile command. For the Holy Spirit brings courage and boldness to Peter and John and the courage is contagious. The growing community of Christian converts pray together, saying "And now, Lord, grant to your servants to speak your word with boldness ... through the name of your holy servant Jesus." And that, through the Holy Spirit, is exactly what happened. They *were* filled with boldness, the Christian community kept growing, more miracles occurred, and the high priests couldn't stand it. In chapter 5, just before the reading we heard from Acts this morning, we read that the Sadducees were filled with jealousy and arrested the apostles again. This time the whole council and all the elders of Israel were called together. Just imagine what that must have been like! How daunting, how intimidating, how terrifying would that have been for the apostles? And yet, the power and boldness given them by the Holy Spirit prevailed, and as we heard in our reading this morning, they say to the Council, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." What amazing courage was that!

But as I said at the beginning of this sermon, this first reading today - from Acts - takes us well into the story of the new Christian community. In a way, it tells us how things worked out, in the early days at least. And what we see, the courage we observe, is a long way from the fearful, doubting group of grieving followers of Jesus, locked away for fear of the Jews, that we heard about today in our Gospel reading from John. And that is the gift of the Holy Spirit at work.

This Sunday, the second Sunday of Easter, is sometimes referred to as “Low Sunday”, which sounds like it might have some considerable spiritual or liturgical significance. But in actual fact, it refers to the likely low attendances after Holy Week and Easter Sunday. Looking around, it seems St Nicholas’ is not following this expected trend, and for that we give great thanks.

Because even though the great Easter Triduum of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday is behind us, we are now in a very special time of the church year, a period that culminates in the Day of Pentecost. It has been said that it is in these days known as Paschaltide, between the resurrection of Jesus and, fifty days later, the overflowing of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, that the full awareness of what it is to live in Christ, with and through Christ, finally dawns. The first Christians living through these days were the first citizens of the new creation. In this period we are all risen to new life. We all become a new people together. Liturgically, it is a period of unmitigated joy and celebration. For fifty great days, the heart of the Christian community has a sense of ultimate fulfilment.

Paschaltide is a period of Christian enlightenment. We come to know during these great fifty days not only who Jesus is but who we are meant to be, as a result. The Paschal candle – Jesus with us – shines every day in the church. Having journeyed with Jesus and with each other through the poignancy of the servant leadership of Jesus on Maundy Thursday, through the passion of Jesus on Good Friday - the horror of it and the victory of it - we are now at that point of our liturgical journey where we spontaneously cry out in joy, again and again, “He is risen indeed, Alleluia, Alleluia!” Yes, we may at times be fearful. Yes, we may at times have our doubts. But through our baptism, we like the apostles, are filled with the Holy Spirit, and from that all things are possible. Thanks be to God.

+ In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.