

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Easter 7 (24 May)

Acts 1:6-14

According to one commentator on the Book of Acts, there are a number of significant – if subtle in parts – factors contained within today's extract, and it may be useful for us to look at these in more detail (the following are my words and interpretation, I hasten to add, not his! Your analysis may be totally different):

- ❖ The core revelation comes from Jesus. The author is showing that, whatever may be hereafter, it will all be as a result of this one character: the person of the Christ, risen as He was from the grave. Already the followers were aware of this unique status; already they were the recipients of image, teaching and reality, however bizarre it may have seemed; after all, people do not usually rise from the dead, so who is this Jesus? Their acknowledgement of His power reveals itself through kingship imagery – are you really going to prove your authority? Now?
- ❖ The authority was, though, not to be as they assumed. Jesus was clearly not going to replace Pilate on the throne! This more subtle authority will come to the individuals gathered – there is the promise of that – it will come whenever, however, and to whoever. There is, in the author's use of words, an indicator to the ethereal nature of this authority. We, with two thousand years of practice, know this to be that inner power of faith, but for our friends in first-century Palestine, this was ahead of them.
- ❖ But Jesus does promise – and that promise stands. You may not know when, and you probably will not have any control over it (the revelation of vocation in all of us has proved that over our lives – you simply cannot shake God off if He does not want you to!). But it will happen, do not be under any illusion that it will not. And the promise is to be a gift beyond their comprehension.
- ❖ The gift of something called "the Holy Spirit", and this gift was to have power over them and those whom they engaged with. What, I wonder, could they possibly have made of this? They had been observers of Jesus' ministry, they knew the tasks He performed, they were witnesses to the resurrection – they were aware that Jesus had power beyond definition; they no doubt believed that such came from God. Now, were they to receive similar? We, as readers, are deprived of any real sense of their reaction to such, no emotion or excitement is recorded, which is a shame, but maybe there is 'power' in the quiet?
- ❖ Do any of us get over-excited about our faith? And yet it remains. Do any of us look energised or enthusiastic when we gather? And yet it is there. Do we even need to? Maybe it simply exists. Permeating. Evolving. Guiding. Who can say? Sometimes it would be good to get excited – but often it is in the quiet, dutiful, prayerful, devotional that the greater power resides. The emotions of these early followers are echoed through the centuries into the characters we no doubt are. And we have been called for a reason, however oblique that may seem at times.

- ❖ This power was not a passing whim, either. The concept of scale given in the text hints at the forthcoming global nature of what is to be. "You – my friends and companions – you are to continue what we have begun. You are to be empowered to do this, and you will represent me. You are my witnesses." And the scale of the task ahead will stretch to the outer limits of the known world. Go out, be who you are. Name my name. Keep the cause. Fighting talk! Encouraging words. Their loyalty to their friend rewarded for all its worth – they too can share in the power that Jesus had shown during His time on Earth; and now that time was over. Changeover was in the air.
- ❖ Confirmation of the rightful status of Christ comes through His ascension. However inexplicable this may seem in twenty-first century 'scientific' eyes, scripture records the phenomenon of Jesus' return to God in such a way. It does not matter what the 'mechanics' of it were. What matters is we get a clear understanding of the passage between here and there – and a subtle hint that maybe this is a route we may all travel one day? The role of the men in white (Angels?) underlining all that is being perceived. They hint at His return. Tantalizing. How will this be? Will He just keep re-appearing? And what role will this promised 'spirit' have? Again, the author teases us with no record of their reaction to all this, save that they simply return home.
- ❖ Journeying home is finely laden with spiritual imagery. They return to Jerusalem, the epi-centre of faith in that time. They return from the mountain, that ancient place of communing with God in the Hebrew tradition. They travel 'a Sabbath day's journey', suggesting a prayerful atmosphere. A pilgrimage air. Symbolically, this was no mere walk back to where they lived.
- ❖ This home was to be their base. The beginnings of a shape and form to faith and its structure. Rooms – upper ones especially – have played their part; they will continue to do so. No more rambling around, standing on street corners or shorelines – now, a focal point. A sanctuary, perhaps? The start of human structures for the faith to identify with? A pile of bricks on a street corner in North Camp has grown out of this room. Is it a hindrance or a help? Paul's ministry (which predates Acts' authorship) was nomadic – here, Luke is suggesting a firmer support. This room was to prove pivotal in the days to come, for Pentecost's drama is yet to unfold.
- ❖ In that room, people. Not faceless crowds, but named individuals. The core players. The key personnel. Here was the start of this new brand. The new 'kid-on-the-block'. The "New Way" as it was originally called. Here was where Christ's teaching may indeed sprout new shoots and grow exponentially. Here were concrete foundations (despite concrete not having yet been invented!). Here was hope.
- ❖ Hope, because their role was not to gather to argue or discuss the minutiae of those same bricks (this was, thankfully, not the beginnings of "PCC!"), but to be together for one prime reason: to constantly devote themselves to prayer. What a wonderful idea! Let us try it! Let us encourage the world to join in. Let us see what it can do to change that world ...

P.S.

Our original commentator mentions the fact that this list of names – and the subsequent election of one other (Matthias) to replace Judas, and thus maintain the notion of twelve leaders – could prove the beginnings of the hierarchical structure of 'Church', with its need for management, order, councils, committees and synods! Who can say – and was it a mistake, I wonder! One thing the author of Acts does poetically do is to ensure that the status of Mary remains firm. She was the focus of the story at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, she is part of its 'end' here today. For some of us, that is critically important to the whole picture. The Mother of God at the core of faith.

Fr. Ian