

Seventh Sunday after Easter 28 May 2017

[Acts 1: 6 - 14 ; Psalm 68: 1-10, 32-35; ; 1 Peter 5:1 - 14 ; John 17:1-11](#) Vanderbilt

[Easter 7 A May 28 2017](#) Textweek

All three readings today, when I first read them, seemed as if they pointed to my leaving, for they all seemed to speak of departure.

In the first reading, an account of 'the Ascension', Jesus departs; and in the second reading we have the final lines of Peter, his final words to his congregation; how pointed is that?

And then in the gospel, Jesus reflects on "the hour has come"; time for him to hand over the reins and to know "I am no longer in the world", no longer in this place with you.

On Friday morning this last week the ABC were here again to do some more interviews and I was asked about leaving St Paul's and what I hoped for St Paul's after I leave; and then that afternoon we had a funeral for a young mother and sitting in the front here were her three children grieving in the pain they felt as they encountered the emptiness they were left with.

Every one of us has experienced 'departures'; those who have left us, those we have left, death, divorce, moving house, changing jobs, retirement, children leaving home; and with every ending we've probably all experienced the gravitational emotion of grief; a force that seems to overpower us with a reality of emptiness and loss.

However, if we stay with the readings, and also as we more fully engage our grief we might be awakened to a deeper reality; and discover that underneath the powerful force of grief there lies the truth of life's eternal ebb and flow; and the unfolding of one Divine story that we are all a part of.

Perhaps the whole pattern of consumerism taps into the powerful emotion of grief; maybe we acquire possessions in order to give us a sense of an unchanging identity, they enable us to define 'my place', a being here, at home and so distract us from the ever-changing ebb and flow that is the very movement of life.

Consider how different the life experience was for a primitive, or early, humanity; groups of nomadic peoples moving from place to place in order to align with, and benefit from, the overall rhythm of the natural world.

Then as we settled into stable urbanised communities we no longer needed to attend to the changing natural order of life; our experience of stability almost drugged us into seeing a world now made in our image; unchanging, routine, fixed, the same day-after-day, season after season.

Remember it's less than 50 years ago that if you wanted strawberries, you would have to wait for summer; somehow we now think that we control the seasons, and so another subtle impression that life is unchanging.

We are now so conditioned to a sense of status quo that we no longer even expect change; in fact, we're often taken by surprise when change occurs, and so the powerful force of grief invariably catches us off guard.

In the account of the Ascension there is the delightful cameo of Jesus rising up through the clouds; and those who are left behind are left standing "*gazing up toward heaven*"; caught in the emptiness of loss, gobsmacked at the abrupt change, or perhaps frozen in the grip of grief.

Whatever the reason the writer then says "two men in white robes stood by them", an echo from the same writer who wrote about two men meeting Mary at the Easter tomb; and their dialogue has a similar echo;

"They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

Or to put that another way; why are you not also moving in accord with, and aligned to, the Divine movement?

Our purpose in reading the Scriptures is not to read and re-read over and over again about Jesus; rather it is to seek a reflection of ourselves; and in the cameo of the Ascension I see a reflection of the changing landscape of my life and of the life of St Pauls.

I've experienced my own energy echoing both the movement of departure, and with equal force, the standing, gazing non-movement of staying.

The rightness of going forward in accord with life's unfolding and the associated grief that accompanies every departure and that leaves me in a place of standing and not knowing.

And perhaps it is in finding ourselves in both roles that we might eventually encounter and experience the deeper reality of change, and the reality of life's Divine movement.

"*Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*" is a question for me as I encounter a new landscape, and a question for each of us at St Paul's as we encounter a new landscape.

Much as we all might wish to hold on to our delusion of a pretend status quo, the reality of life is to be more fully encountered when we acknowledge and attune ourselves to the evolutionary change of life's eternal longing for itself. And when we truly embrace change, we can more truly realise our higher selves, there is a popular new age gospel that simplifies and summarises the reality of the Ascension; "*for things to change, first I must change.*"

When we read the last lines of Peter's letter, we discover a Peter more like us than the saint who is glorified as the first pope. And we read a confident handing on from one of a number of elders in the church with an exhortation to continue and to keep moving toward "*the crown of glory that never fades away.*"

Peter sees his congregation as participants in his life's unfolding, just as he understands for himself the eternal nature of a life story in which he and all peoples are an integral part; it is an ending that cheats grief and finds that deeper reality of life lived in communion.

The gospel seeks to capture this whole process in a theological equation that incorporates much of our liturgical movement and Church teaching; Father, Son, Glory, all people, eternal life, heaven and earth, mine and yours; these are all part of the gospel's Divine equation.

And when you look at the operators of the equation, what in mathematical equations are the plus and minus signs, we find that "give", "gave" or "given" are used ten times and "received" is used once; and that speaks volumes about the unfolding of life's truest orientation.

And it is the equal sign at the end of the equation that we're really looking for; "*so that they may be one, as we are one.*"

When we 'know' the reality of life's Divine equation there is also a knowing of life's eternal movement, the giving of oneself into unfolding of life for all; and once again that not only cheats the power of grief, it cheats death itself as we ascend beyond of life's mortal destination.

It has been, for me at least, a timely lectionary this week; and going back to the questions that the ABC asked of me on Friday, it really did require an immediate, and so a gut, reaction rather than a well thought out and cleverly crafted reply.

The question was along the lines of 'what did I hope for St Paul's after I leave'; and it is a question that equally needs to be addressed by all of us; it is very much a question that we might all bring together answers for at the AGM next month.

My response finds it's parallel in the readings today; for we will certainly not be left standing gazing up at the sky, rather we echo the community and the congregation of Peter.

I told the ABC after a thoughtful pause, that I hoped for an expected more of the same; and then explained.

For more of the same does not mean a status quo, nor does it mean hanging on to what we have, unless we're just standing in one place.

They were particularly interested in how our relationship with the Muslim community might unfold; and I delighted in reflecting that I didn't know; for the life of St Paul's is not built on knowing. There is no grand plan here, and no destination is offered, rather we measure life by movement and direction; and what I told them, was I'm sure what Peter felt as he finished his letter to his community.

The life of St Paul's is not in the hands of a pope-like elder, rather it is very much held by those who participate in moving toward that which is beyond self and that seeks to be one; "*so that they may be one, as we are one.*"

When we read the scriptures, and today's cameo of the Ascension, it is good to discover ourselves, not as those left standing, but rather as one, ascending. And in the same cameo we can see that same movement is driven by the Divine action, the very action of God in giving.

Another delightful echo, for I'm not really heading off to the clouds, rather I'm going to focus on the reality of "In Giving We Receive".

Amen

Peter Humphris