

ST GEORGE'S EASTERGATE; 24TH MAY 2020 ; EASTER 7.

Last Thursday the Christian church celebrated Ascension Day and the week before the country celebrated the bicentenary of the birth of Florence Nightingale. I have found it interesting and helpful to see how both of these two events have a great deal to say about the situation we find ourselves in at the moment.

The work of Florence Nightingale has been of course remembered with great gratitude recently and of course the naming of the Nightingale hospital reflects that. The situation of fighting against infection that is difficult to control was what Florence Nightingale met when she felt called by God to form a nursing organisation to go to the scene of the Crimean war. It is interesting to look at the thinking that was spurring her on to action. As I have said she was a devout Christian whose work as a medical and social reformer was a direct response to a calling from God; it was her vocation. Very prevalent at the time was the casual acceptance in the church that suffering was part of God's will for humanity and therefore should just be accepted. We of course build our faith on the belief that God suffered Himself on the cross to save all people everywhere but that is not to say that what Florence Nightingale believed to be true is not a vital part of what Christians believe today in the face of this infectious

epidemic. She felt strongly that human suffering should be seen as a prompt to stay alert to what God is saying to His world and also as a call to action to improve social conditions...how very relevant is that to our present situation.!! [BE ALERT I hear ringing in our ears...but I mean be alert to what God is saying!]

In our Gospel reading today we see Jesus being alert to what God was doing and asking, on behalf of His followers, for God's help for them in the world. His prayer gives us an insight into the mystery behind God's action in the world. Last week we read how Jesus asked the Father for an Advocate to be with them after he no longer was; this of course looks towards the giving of the Holy Spirit...God's presence to be with believers for ever wherever they are...a Comforter. This week, having just celebrated Ascension, Jesus prayer for his followers moves on from this. Again the context of this prayer is that it is uttered in the shadow of His betrayal and death but this time He sees those events not as tragic but quite the opposite..He sees them as the very events that show God's Glory...His true essence and power.. "the hour has come, glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you" In other words it is in the Cross that the whole world will be able to see that the Creator of the universe loves in such a way that He is willing to give everything to make it possible for us to share His eternal life! This is almost too much to grasp...but the heart of this prayer that we have just heard is that this greatness, or

glory, of God will from now on live in the followers of Jesus on earth; and furthermore they will be united together in this as Jesus and God the Father are united...ONE! [our petty differences mar the vision of God that the world sees!]

It is the story of the Ascension which was read to us in the epistle that of course makes this possible. This festival of the Ascension marks the end of the Easter season with Jesus appearing over a period of weeks to different disciples. At the Ascension He leaves them for ever and enters the God dimension...indicating clearly that we will do likewise when our time comes. This did not mean that life on earth was going to be easy though. Feeling fearful and perplexed as to what was going on the followers of Jesus had devoted themselves to prayer...something I have constantly been urging us to do in our perplexing times!... when they experienced a vision of Jesus in glory ascending to be with God. They were told not to just stand there and gaze but to carry on doing what they were doing.

I must be honest here...I have often found it hard personally to see how this story of the Ascension fits in to the Gospel story...my difficulty with it is not helped by works of art that show feet sticking out of clouds. I have however found it helpful to see that Luke wrote his accounts of the Ascension in a culture where the powerful Roman empire publicised, after the death of an emperor,

stories of him being seen after death ascending to heaven as a god. This was the way the Roman empire subjected its people to obedience by means of a political and religious ideology. It was against this background that the followers of Jesus came to see that the one true God was not interested in this kind of power...His is the glory of selfless love...which will and is changing the world! This crucified and glorious Lord is now joining the Gos domain and this is made visible for His followers to give them the hope they need.

So in conclusion lets rejoice today in the wonder of this God, Ascended, Risen, Glorified, upon whom the whole of our world depends ...for it is only when we acknowledge our dependence ...especially in our present crisis...and are driven to our knees as those first disciples were... that we shall be able to see things in their true perspective.

AMEN