Embracing the World
A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Acts 1. 6-14; 1 Peter 4. 12-14; 5.6-11; John 17. 1-11

If someone had interviewed the disciples in those first few days after the Ascension I wonder what kind of witnesses they would have been. Of course they would have talked about how their lives had been changed and transformed by Jesus. They might have repeated his instruction that they were waiting for the strengthening and power of his Spirit, his commission to them that they would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, and shared with this person something of what that vision might be and the wonderful things they had seen and witnessed as they had accompanied Jesus in his ministry.

As they recounted these things I imagine they would have come to life, been lit up, in touch with what they’d seen and heard and themselves had been part of, with the joy and delight of the resurrection experiences, sharing anecdotes of early breakfast on the beach, encounters that shaped them as individuals and as a community. But what else would that interviewer have seen and heard, beneath the surface, if they had been observant?

- the disciples’ own feelings of shame at fleeing on that fateful night of the Last Supper; seen the trauma they were carrying from the crucifixion; a sense of loss because, despite the resurrection appearances, the most important person to them in the world, just wasn’t in their lives any more. They would have sensed, behind brave words, the worry that perhaps it would all come to nothing. They would have seen in this little community, rudderless perhaps; a mix of anxiety, hopefulness, elation, confusion, and sorrow. The disciples would have witnessed to the hope and joy that was in them, but also the fear, confusion, loss and uncertainty too, now that they were on their own. Did they feel like the kind of people Jesus said would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth? Did they feel up to the task?

Today is the Sunday between Ascension Day, which we celebrated here on Thursday, poignantly with the Bishop of Manchester as our preacher, and Pentecost next Sunday, when the church celebrates the coming of the gift of the Holy Spirit, that makes all the promises of God possible. We can’t escape this Sunday. On this Sunday of waiting, we feel with the disciples that gap between what Jesus’ hopes and promises for his disciples, and what they feel when they are left to themselves, without him.

We too can’t help being aware of our own fearfulness and inadequacies, in amidst the joy that we have perhaps glimpsed of Jesus present to us in these 40 days of Easter. Remember a time when you were left to your own devises and felt daunted, unprepared like the disciples for the task that lay ahead of you. It has that same feeling of those few moments after I passed my driving test and took the car out on my own, with no one in the passenger seat. Is it really supposed to be like this we wonder? How do we too live hopefully into the future as faithful disciples?

This week has been a week of great sadness and suffering with the dreadful atrocity in Manchester on Monday evening, lives lost and torn apart and changed forever, a tragic event that has deeply shocked and wounded us all. And when we thought it couldn’t be worse, the Coptic Christians in Minya in Egypt, travelling to a monastery, killed by another brutal terrorist attack on Friday.

How can we live faithfully, in a way that shows what the God that we believe in is like in the face of this great sadness? A God who in Jesus, tells us to stay where we are? Stay with the suffering and confusion, holding on to the hope that is in us, waiting for the gift of the Spirit, uncertain how we
are to live confidently into the future. How can we be up to the task? And how is the church, the community of those who gather to wait, supposed to live that out too?

Jesus shows us that we are to pray, to embrace the world, even in a week like this, rather than fear the world, and to be people of glory. To pray, to embrace the world, to be people that reflect his glory.

Jesus doesn’t just give his disciples a pattern to follow or a message to share, he gives them a life to live, his life. In his life, death and resurrection Jesus embraced the world, our suffering world, and fulfilled his call to glory. In prayer he opens for us a way into intimate relationship with the Father. Jesus didn’t leave the disciples so that they would be helpless. He left them because that was the plan from the beginning. Unless he left them they would not know what it meant to live freely in the love of Father and Son, and be called into a future, an eternal future, full of hope, called to be people of glory. We wait for the Holy Spirit because we need that presence of God’s grace to help us to find ways to live God’s life and be bearers of his loving presence and glory to our suffering world, a world that is shot through with beauty and tragedy.

We hear at the beginning of John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.”¹ Jesus, God’s living word, was always meant to be with the Father. In the incarnation, he came to be with us in solidarity, so that we could be with him too, and be drawn into that life of endless love with the Father. A life that suffered the atrocity of a shameful brutal death and through the resurrection brought life in the place of death and destruction. Hope out of fear, love out of hate, joy out of despair; hope, love and joy.

In our Gospel reading we hear Jesus at the Last Supper in intimate prayer to the father. Time stands still. He says that his hour has come. It is time for him to be glorified, a glory that means embracing suffering and death, and he prays to the Father for himself, for his disciples and for those who will believe through their witness, which includes us.

This isn’t a prayer to the disciples giving them final instructions, but an intimate prayer to the Father, on the eve of his passion, in which the disciples are prayed for. Again in the prologue to the Gospel we hear that ‘it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him know.’² This prayer is the disciples’ way into that relationship. It is our way to be close to the Father’s heart too. We also are included.

Jesus prays, not that they, and we, will be spared the suffering of the world, but that they might be one. We are invited to live as those who are prayed for by Christ from the heart of the Father. That gives us a way to live in the world and embrace the world, even a world full of suffering, confident that we are prayed for, that we are bound up in the life of God. That those we bring to God in prayer are embraced in that love also.

In our prayers this week those we have prayed for are gathered into that loving embrace. The eternal love of God is present to us, not at some distant point, but we have access to that eternal love here and now. God is intimately connected to the details of our lives and our days. This affirmation gives us a way to embrace the world and makes it possible to live with hope, love and joy in the day-to-day reality of our lives.

We hear that the fragile Christian community stay together and gather for prayer. It is what they know. Through prayer they will come to know God’s purposes for them and for the world. Praying together and being together are marks of the church. It is what we are doing gathered here today.

Archbishop Justin has encouraged the church to commit to praying in these 9 days before Pentecost, ‘Thy Kingdom Come’. Praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us as we live with the world as it is now, often so far from that vision of God’s Kingdom. But

¹ John 1.1
² John 1.18
confident that God will come to abide with us, faithfully, with the presence of Jesus through the Spirit, that his kingdom may come. And his glory may be revealed. The work of the church is to pray, to embrace the world, and reflect God’s glory.

There have been many glimpses of the glory of God’s presence this week in Manchester: brave loving words from those broken by the loss of having the one they most love in the world taken from them; the steadfastness of those who stayed with the traumatised and injured; the compassion and dedication of medical staff and emergency services staff working through the night; communities coming together amidst tragedy, speaking words of hope, love and compassion, reaching out across the different faith communities with love and friendship and even beginning to ask the difficult questions together.

Like the disciples who gather back in Jerusalem, it is not yet time to move on. Today it is time to stay, to pray, to be together, to embrace the world and in our own way to reflect God’s glory.

If we wondered how we are to be witnesses to God’s love in the world, to be faithful disciples, to witness to the ends of the earth, this is what it means: to be very present to God and to those we pray for, to be present in this loving community, staying close to the father’s heart, knowing what it means to be one.

Manchester and Minya are the ends of the earth. This is the ends of the earth. Let us be faithful witnesses, waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit.