

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER Year A Responsibility: Canon Barlow 5th June, 2011

“God .. raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.” (Ephesians 1:20)

Forty days after Easter, Thursday last, we commemorate our Lord’s return to heaven. During this period, known as the Great Forty Days, the Risen Christ had appeared to His disciples a number of times. But these visits were not to continue indefinitely. To bring them to an end Jesus met the Eleven on a mountain in Galilee, according to St Matthew, or according to St. Luke, near Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. (Luke 24:50; Acts 1:12) After giving them their final instructions to witness to Him throughout the whole world, and “when He had said this, as they were watching, He was lifted up and a cloud took Him out of their sight.” (Acts 1:9) He was removed from their sight so that they could not see Him any longer with their physical sight. His body had now gone beyond the limitations of this world altogether, the limitations of time and space. Ever since the Resurrection our Lord’s body had been free from the conditions our bodies are subject to, and the Ascension was the last of the post-Resurrection, visible appearances to the disciples which had been taking place at intervals throughout the Great Forty Days.

We are not to think of Jesus going up and up and disappearing into and above the “bright blue sky” as a children’s hymn suggests. He did not “soar through tracts unknown” as another hymn says, to some astronomically remote place. The Ascension is much more wonderful and mysterious than that. He passed out of time and space altogether. He did not go up as one ascends in an aeroplane or even a rocket. He went up as a prince becomes a king, or as a soldier becomes an officer, or as a child goes up from Primary School to High School. He is not in some “happy land, far, far away”, but as St. Paul said to the People of Athens” “God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17; 27, 28)

We may sometimes wonder why our Lord withdrew at all. How much simpler religion would be if the Christ appeared to His followers from time to time. The question is easy to ask but the answer is not simple. In fact it is bordering on the impertinent to question the wisdom of God. But we can see in part some of the more obvious reasons for His actions. As long as Jesus remained subject to the limitations of space and time, as He was even with His risen and glorified body, He could only be in one place at one time. Nor apparently could the Holy Spirit come to His people, for, He said: “Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.” (John 16:7) Now God the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Strengthener, can we with all and each of His disciples where ever they may be. The disciples had to stop relying on Jesus making decisions for them, and learn to stand on their own feet, making their own decisions with the guidance only of the Holy Spirit. Because Jesus Christ ascended into Heaven, the Holy Spirit is with us now and at all times. And He gives us, if we seek it, grace or heavenly strength, especially through His ordained and guaranteed channels, the Sacraments.

In spite of the difficulty of expressing such eternal concepts, the Church has always proclaimed as fundamental to the Faith, the Ascension of Christ and the Resurrection of which it is the climax. Here we have essential truths about God and about our relationship with Him. The Resurrection and the Ascension stand for the fact that the power of Christ’s saving and restoring actions is available to men and women of any and every century. They also mean that Christ is King. His kingdom interpenetrates all the nations of this world. He told His

disciples: “The kingdom of heaven is in your midst” and it has been in the hearts and minds of His followers ever since, all those who belong to the fellowship of faith. Although this kingdom is invisible, yet it has visible manifestations, not only in the visible Church, but within the whole of society which it influences. The Kingdom is not a name of a fellowship of those who treasure the teachings and example of some leader long dead. He who is the source of its being is also its living Leader who rules over it for evermore. The Creed says of our Lord who ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father, that “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” Time and history, that is, this world, will come to an end, as all living things do. It may be by God’s doing; it may be by man’s doing in the exercise of the freedom God has given him. But whatever – at the end of human history stands the Judgement. And the Judge will be Him who has already claimed our world as part of His Kingdom, and who has experienced it. This is comforting knowledge, for we know the standards by which He will judge us. As a man He knows our infirmities and He understands our human frailties and limitations. But He also knows our possibilities, and in His sown life He demonstrated them. The fact that He is one of us, promises a fair and understanding judgement. But it will also be searching and penetrating. It is no good trying to imagine an exact picture of this event, but Jesus described it as a great sorting out, as of sheep from goats or edible fish from poisonous. (Matt 25: 33; 13: 48) Our Lord as Judge will show the same two qualities as He shows as Saviour: perfect love and perfect justice.

Meanwhile we live in an interim age, until he shall come again. His kingdom has already come, but we are rebellious subjects all too often. His kingdom is yet to come, in another sense, when He comes in glory to claim His rightful inheritance from the powers of darkness, the usurpers and revolutionaries.

Some people would have us believe that this world is unimportant in the eternal scheme of things. They are wrong. Others say that this world is the sum total of eternal meaning, that beyond this world there is nothing. They are wrong too. The doctrine of human progress is in this category – that mankind is always developing for the better. Surely the events of recurring international strife and ethnic hatred disprove that one.

The other approach, held by Christians, is that there is meaning in both the eternal and the historical realms. The world does matter – what happens here has meaning for two major reasons. Firstly, the development of creative personalities, sound personal relationships, constructive community life, and a peaceful world are in themselves intensely important. They are part of the very object of creation, ways in which man, made in God’s image, can share in God’s creative activity, and in a way, help finish His creation, reducing chaos to order. Secondly, what happens here matters because abiding results hinge on decisions made here. Here men and women can be saved. Here there are real means of grace. Quite probably this world is not the only place where grace can reach men and women; probably it is not the only place where men and women can respond to grace. But it is a place and the only place in which we can directly function now, and the only one we know much about. It is the place where we are responsible for faithful action now.

To the faithful follower of Christ the idea of judgement and future life should hold no fears, and this is a Jesus intended. In one of His last discourses to His disciples He said: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:1-3) So we joyfully sing in the Te Deum:

“You, Lord Christ, are the King of glory: the eternal Son of the Father.

When you took our flesh to set us free: you humbly chose the Virgin's womb.
You overcame the sting of death: and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.
You are seated at God's right hand in glory: we believe that you will come to be our judge.
Come then, Lord, and help your people, bought with the price of your own blood:
and bring us with your saints to glory everlasting." Amen.

Responsibility Canon Barlow

‘Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”’ *John 20:19*

Earlier on, Jesus had promised ‘The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.’ (John 14: 26 -27)

Today the Church commemorates the fulfilling of that promised coming of the Holy Spirit; yet the Holy Spirit had been in the world, working in and through men and women ever since the creation of mankind – and even before that, for the opening verses of Genesis 1 says ‘In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. Now the earth was formless and void, darkness was over the face of the earth, **and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.** (Gen 1: 1-2)

It is not easy to grasp the wholeness of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: we should be thinking about that next Sunday. It is much easier for us to think of God in His three relationships with us: God the Father, turning our thoughts to God in creation and providence. God the Son, turning our thoughts to God in redemption and an example of holy living; and God the Holy Spirit, turning our thoughts to God in revelation, guidance, and the controlling, equipping and directing of life. But we must take care that we do NOT think of God playing as it were, each of these parts consecutively, one after the other. That is, to think of God as first of all Creator, then as redeemer and then as Sustainer. What the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is saying is that God is **continuously** creating, redeeming, and sustaining. If we think along these lines, we will not then think of the work of redemption in Jesus Christ as being a kind of desperate emergency measure of God when the work of creation had gone wrong. We will avoid the trap of thinking of the Atonement as a placating of an irate Father, annoyed because His children had disobeyed Him. The Power which created, the Love which redeems, and the grace which sustains are one and the same, and have been, are, and will be in action from all eternity to all eternity.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned a number of times in the Old Testament, but to those writers, the Spirit of God was a power or influence, not then known to be personal. We are justified in understanding such passages in the Old Testament as being indeed references to the Third Person of the Trinity, for we have a much more complete revelation of the Being of God than those who lived prior to the lifetime of Jesus.

The use of the words ‘the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,’ (Luke 1:35) at the Annunciation to Mary, was no doubt understood by her in the Old Testament sense, because the fuller understanding of the Holy Trinity was yet to come. We need have no doubt, though, that it was the Third Person of the Holy Trinity who empowered Mary to become the mother of Christ, even though a virgin. Jesus was, as the Prayer Book phrases it in the Nicene Creed, ‘incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human.’

The incident referred to in the first lesson for today describes the tremendous effort on the apostles of the revelation that the Spirit of God is much more than a mere influence or power. For the first time in history, people had revealed to them that the Holy Spirit is personal, vital, life-giving and strengthening. When this revelation hit them their heads spun with the roaring noise of a mighty rushing wind, and they saw above each other’s heads the appearance of tongues of fire. They found themselves to be changed people, and their subsequent lives showed that.

Down through the years, the Church has provided for its people means by which they may open themselves to the influence of the Spirit. And we know them as Sacraments. Of course, the Holy Spirit cannot be confined my man-made forms of service and people taking part are able to deny the influence of the Holy Spirit. So there is nothing automatic, penny-in-the-slot activity. But approached rightly, we know by experience, that the Sacraments are genuine channels of grace and love from the God the Holy Spirit.

In Baptism, a person is brought into the Family of the Church

In Confirmation, a person commits his or her life to Christ

In Holy Communion, one seeks strength for daily life

In Penance, one seeks for amendment of life and regret for past errors

In Matrimony, where two people are united to live together in harmony.

In Holy Orders, where a person commits to a specialized ministry in the Church

In Holy Unction, where a person, sick in mind, body or spirit, seeks strength and healing

Sometimes, to a person inside or outside the Church, there comes a moment of revelation somewhat similar to those experienced by the Apostles. – a great flood of recognition bringing an ecstasy and excitement which they describe under such inadequate terms as being ‘born again,’ or ‘baptized in the Spirit.’ Most people, though, live out their lives without ever experiencing any such disturbing emotion. Rather, their experience is the knowledge of an inner peace and tranquillity. Some of us have times when we know of both manifestations of the presence of the Holy Spirit with us.

It is not difficult to see the appropriateness of wind and fire, as the outward signs of that first revelation. In many languages, wind, breath and spirit are all expressed in one word. They all imply vitality, invigoration, and alertness. A breath of fresh air after being in a stuffy Hall; or as you leave city smog; don’t we all take a deep breath of fresh country air, and inhale it deeply into our lungs, with that feeling of refreshment? And fire has always been the symbol of zeal and purification, consuming rubbish, and leaping from one object on to another. Whichever way the Holy Spirit manifests Himself in our lives, above all else it should be to help us to know peace even amongst the turmoil of care and worry, and the pressures of everyday life. One of the great gifts of the Holy Spirit is that peace of mind and ability to accept and cope with whatever life tosses at us, and it is the sign that He is with us. We receive that gift as we open ourselves to God, without reservation or holding back,

Jesus said, ‘Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.’ God grant to us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things, and evermore to rejoice in His holy comfort.’ **Amen**

The Catholic Faith is this: that we worship One God in Trinity, and trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.

These are the opening words of the third great Creed of Christian statements of summaries that we call 'Creeds.' The first two creeds and the Apostles' Creed, used in Morning and Evening Prayer and in the Baptismal Service. Then there is the Nicene Creed, with which we are familiar because of its use in the Communion Service. This Creed which has been quoted above is the Creed of St. Athanasius which you will find in page 487 of your green Prayer Book (APBA). In AAPB it is on page 625. They are there because they are rarely used today. Perhaps because of its uncompromising statement that 'except everyone do keep this faith whole and undefiled, without doubt he will perish everlastingly.' Also 'they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. This is the Catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.' None of this seems to allow for the forgiving love of God!!!

This ancient Creed, which is more like a hymn of faith, was written about the year 400AD, it is thought by St. Ambrose, and named in honour of one who contended against powerful heretics to the Faith Athanasius. There are always those who would water down the Faith because they do not understand it. Of course, we cannot understand God, for if we could, He would not be God! We cannot understand ourselves, sometimes, let alone others, and least of all, the One Who created us. All attempts to explain God must be somewhat feeble, limited by human experience and the lack of something or Someone with whom we might compare Him. With what does one compare perfection? How can humans explain God when we have only the mortal and worldly to measure with? The Athanasian Creed with its repeated insistence that the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Ghost is God, and yet not three Gods but one God was a battle hymn of an earlier age. In those days, the Church realized, perhaps better than we, that small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Also there is no salvation to be found except in Christ, Incidentally, the second half of this creed deals with the Incarnation – the other great difficulty in the Christian Faith.

So how did humans try to hold such a difficult and inexplicable faith? In the first place, people did not want to have a complicated idea of God. So this has developed in spite of what people *wanted*. And it has developed gradually because God has gradually and progressively revealed himself to people, in order that we may have some idea of what God is like. Most people seem to have some belief - however crude – in a Mastermind Creator. Even the most primitive tribe has this! To the race of people known as the Hebrews or Jews, God chose to reveal Himself possibly more clearly than to any other people. We can trace that revelation and development through the pages of the Old Testament . And all the way through, we find that people then were very slow and reluctant to believe that God could or would have dealings with His creation.

In due course, God revealed Himself in a different way from that recorded in the Old Testament. To quote again from the Athanasian Creed: 'The right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the world, and Man of the substance of His mother, born into the world, Perfect God and Perfect Man.

Naturally enough the followers of Jesus did not want to equate Him with God. That would be blasphemy! Tragically, the main reason for our Lord's death was the charge that He was claiming to be equal with God. It so happened that His claim was true but the hierarchy of the Jewish Temple could not see even a slight possibility that such a thing could be true. Only those who went with Jesus, and listened to Him, and watched Him perform the miracles which were the sign of His Divinity, could admit to such a possibility, and even went close to losing their faith at the time of the crucifixion. It was not until the Resurrection that they became convinced of the truth of Jesus' claim. Their whole thinking about God had to be revised.

Almost immediately, their thinking had to be revised again! Before His Ascension, Jesus promised that He would send them another Comforter, (or Advocate or Strengthened,) to be with them for ever. 'The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things, and will remind you of everything that I have said to you.'(John 14:26) There are other similar references, but notice that each time, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit in personal terms. Jesus says 'He' not 'It!' And 'whom' not 'which!' St. Paul in many places speaks of the Holy Spirit as a Person and not a mere impersonal influence.

It is supremely important to believe rightly about God. Every error in religion and morals – indeed often wars and conflicts between people and nations can be traced back to some mistaken belief about the nature of God. A person's conduct, and outlook on life depends on the kind of God that person believes in. Sadly, that is not necessarily the nature of the God he says or even thinks that he believes in.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is meant to give us confidence in God the Father without worrying too much about absolute details; and the desire to worship Him. Confidence in the leading and teaching of Jesus. And confidence in the enlightening, empowering, sanctifying of our inmost lives by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. All with confidence in the One God with Whom we deal and He with us. It means that all we may know of the relationships we may have with God.

There are books written to explain the doctrine of the Holy trinity. It is vital to Christian belief. But we do not have to understand God to worship Him. All we have to do is to learn to say, with all our hearts and minds and souls, the words of the traditional Catechism. "I believe in God the Father Who has created me and the whole human race; secondly, in God the Son Who has redeemed me and the whole human race; thirdly, in God the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies me and all the elect people of God.'

And so to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, be ascribed as is most justly due, all honour, might, majesty, power and dominion, this day and for evermore. Amen

YEAR A Responsibility: Canon Barlow Second Sunday after Pentecost 26th June 2011

“Therefore I tell you,” said Jesus, “do not worry about your life, what you should eat or what you should drink, nor about your body, what you shall wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” (Matt:6:25)

It seems to me that the key word is “worry”, or anxious as it appears in some versions. One of the greatest troubles of our time is worry, anxiety – fear of what might happen. In spite of our semi-welfare state, with its pensions and welfare agencies and high standard of living, we are still bothered by worries about our future, about our health, about our children, about all sorts of things that make us lie awake at night and which sap our ability to think and plan and work calmly and logically through the problems which beset us.

In fact the more sophisticated we become, the more we suffer from this anxiety neurosis – the high rate of suicides in countries with a high standard of living tends to support this claim. In a primitive society, so long as people are protected from physical danger and have food and shelter, they may be content. Our needs tend to multiply as we increase in prosperity, so that however well-off we might be, there are always more things we need and must have, more details to be coped with, more worries to plague us, like mortgage interest rises.

Anxiety must also have been prevalent in the society in which Jesus lived, though largely of course of a different nature. Otherwise he would not have spent so much time in warning his hearers against its dangers. In the Gospels more space is given to this topic of worry than pretty well any other discussed by Jesus. He puts his finger right on the root cause of the whole anxiety, fear complex in the opening words of today’s Gospel: “No-one can serve two masters ... you cannot serve God and mammon.” The word “mammon” stands for all selfish and material desires: money and possessions of themselves are neutral, just things – neither good nor bad. It is the misuse of money and possessions, the greed for them and for what they can do for us, which spoils lives and draws them away from a sense of dependence upon God. St Paul wrote to Timothy: “We brought nothing into this world; for that matter we cannot take anything with us when we leave; but if we have food and covering we may rest content. Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and snares and many foolish harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and perdition. The love of money is the root of all evil things and there are some who in reaching for it have wandered from the faith and spiked themselves on many thorny griefs.” (1 Tim: 6 NEB) How true that still is! Jesus of course never condemned those with money and possessions, but he did warn them of their responsibility for the right use of their wealth, and of the danger of becoming possession-centred and selfish. That is what lies behind such remarks as “How hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven!” It is hard for a poor person too, but the temptations are different.

Money, and the power possession of it brings, or the desire for wealth or power, is the cause of almost every evil. It tends to make the possessor feel independent of God, and also leads to the exploitation of others for further gain of wealth and power. The opposite extreme is not to be provident at all, and the phrase in the old King James Version of the Bible might be taken as encouragement of that idea: “Take no thought for the morrow.” More modern translations phrase it more accurately: “Do not be anxious, do not worry about tomorrow.” To Jesus the whole of nature reflects God’s providential care, and in the world of nature he saw the love of the Father. We are aware, as no doubt Jesus was, that there is much in the natural world which is severe and harsh; yet there is also to be found much beauty, and a reflection of the Creator’s concern for every creature. The command not to worry

does not mean that we're not to make our own provision for now and for the future. Rather we are to co-operate with God, to be fellow-workers with him, to use our God-given gifts of health and strength and intellect. But when we have done all that can reasonably be done, all that lies within our own power, then we must be content to leave the rest to God, and stop worrying about it. We are in the hands of a God who knows us and cares, and his are loving hands. To go on worrying is to doubt God. Once the issue is out of our hands it is absurd to act as though it were not so. What good an all our fretting do? "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" ask Jesus.

Jesus taught us to pray: "Give us today our daily bread." Yet we know that we have to work for it. Is there a paradox here? We know, don't we, that if we do our part God will provide; we are not to worry about material things? We face life believing that if we try to live as God wants us to; if we try to do his will, then somehow or other God provides, and all our needs are met. Though possibly not all our wants.

It's the same with money: if we use it generously, as God's stewards, to help others and helping to meet their needs, not forgetting to give a fair proportion to the work of God through his Church, then God provides. We don't starve; we are adequately clothed and housed; and we are free of the awful anxiety which can bring such distress to our lives. This trust does not mean that we are to fling our money around unthinkingly: that would be waste, not sound stewardship. All of us are entrusted with certain material responsibilities, and it is just as much our duty to look after them as it is to be generous to the needs of others.

And no, I cannot explain adequately how and why it is that Christians in many places in this world suffer starvation and persecution, despite their devout praying: "Give us today our daily bread", other than to recognize that it is the greed and power-seeking of others who cause it, against the will of God.

The point at issue is that we are to place our whole trust in God, and none in ourselves and our possessions. We are to use our possessions in the way they are intended – as our servants and not letting them become our masters. We are not to worry and fret about tomorrow and the day after, and next week, and what might happen in the future. "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness". Set your mind on the Kingdom of God and his justice before anything else, and all the rest will follow in proper sequence. Only when first things are placed first will the whole of life fall harmoniously into place.

We sometimes hear of a "social gospel", meaning the looking to the provision of mankind's material needs and playing-down or ignoring the spiritual aspect of life. The coming of God's Kingdom does have implications for the fulfilling of man's material needs, but the fulfilling of those needs will not of itself bring about the Kingdom of God on earth.

Doesn't all this say something about today's society? With all our possessions; with all the abundance of food and drink and clothing and housing, men and women are still restless; still, by and large, dissatisfied with life, without knowing why. We have frets about rising interest rates and worries about mortgage rates, marriage break-downs, delinquent young people, depression, suicides. And Jesus points to the answer – if the first thing, the Kingdom of God and his righteousness – is not placed first, nothing will fit in its place. AMEN.