

HOMILY FOR ASCENSION DAY

We are familiar with some of the encounters Jesus had with his disciples after the resurrection. For instance, coming into the locked room with the greeting, “Peace be with you” and meeting doubting Thomas;” or his walk to Emmaus; or the fish meal being eaten on the beach when Peter was asked three times whether he loved Jesus. These are a few appearances which are recorded but John reminds us at the end of his Gospel that there were many other moments of the resurrected Jesus being with his disciples.

In the Book of Acts, the author, Luke, tells us that, after the resurrection, Jesus continued to appear to the disciples for forty days. The use of the number, ‘Forty’ is the way the Bible says, ‘a significant amount of time for some kind of transformation to take place’, such as raining for forty days and nights on Noah; Moses living forty years in Egypt; the Hebrews wandering forty years in the desert and; Jesus being was tempted for forty days by the devil.

Significant times come to an end and the Ascension, which we remember today, identifies the moment when the resurrected Jesus no longer appeared to the disciples in the way he had. They were on their own but, the time had not been wasted.

They were to become witnesses of the resurrected Jesus. In fact, not only that but, of the entire story of Christ’s life. Mark’s Gospel describes this as proclaiming the good news to all creation. With Mark, this proclamation is also associated with signs, some of which would not usually be recommended to try at home, such as picking up snakes and drinking deadly poison. Seems more a gimmick than a reality.

But, events like this did take place in the early Church. With regards to casting our demons, the Apostle Paul did exorcise a demon; some disciples spoke in tongues; Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake and survived. Perhaps there was another story which was not recorded of a person drinking deadly poison and surviving. The disciples did heal people. The point is that these signs are not manipulated by human beings but, come through God at work within that which the Church does.

That God is with the Church is affirmed in the three readings. Jesus says in Acts that you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes. We believe he is referring to Pentecost when the Holy Spirit had the first disciples preaching in many languages to the people from different countries. It was certainly the sign to them that Jesus Christ’s coming was for a reason.

Paul writes in Ephesians of how gifts are given so that the entire Body of Christ – the Church - may grow to become more and more like Jesus Christ. Again, this is, for Paul, the outcome of Christ’s coming into the world.

Mark’s Gospel describes how after he took his place with God, Jesus continued to work with the disciples which was confirmed by what they were able to achieve.

In all of this, these writers recognised that at a certain time in history, Jesus was, in a way, injected into the creation – much like a COVID-19 vaccination – and from then onwards, the effect of Jesus Christ’s coming continues to be made known through the Church. The Holy Spirit has come upon us at Baptism and again at Confirmation, uniting us to Christ as

the disciples were intrinsically connected to Jesus because of their experiences with him. This union with Jesus means that our life in this world carries great potential.

I'm sure we all have stories of seemingly unexpected and even unbelievable events – signs – coming to light in the course of our service to Jesus Christ. Jesus does work amongst us. How important it is, that like the first disciples, we continue to grow in our understanding of Jesus and his purpose for us, as well as nurture and grow in our relationship with the resurrected one.