

7th Sunday of Easter (Year C): Between Ascension & Pentecost: waiting.
1st Reading: Acts 7:55-60: Saul (Paul)'s small part in Stephen's killing;
2nd Reading: Apocalypse 22:12-20: the visionary's final message: hope!
Gospel: John 17:20-26: Jesus' prayer to the Father for his Church – us.

I think that the Gospel Acclamation summarises best this weekend's ideas: "I will not leave you orphans (says the Lord); I will come back to you, and your hearts will be full of joy." (John 14:18). Rather like the three-plus weeks of Advent, this weekend's liturgy has a sense of waiting, but not with the tension that often goes with it. The Church wants us to have the emotion that filled the Upper Room in Jerusalem, where the Apostles, our Lady (& several others) seem to have been based in the weeks after Jesus' death. They knew that he was now alive; they had experienced his risen presence several times; but they were aware that this 'physical' type of experience of him was now over. They waited for the "power from on high" (The Holy Spirit) to come to them.

I should like to deal with the gospel first. John 17 is part of what we call Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer" – a sort of long speech, just before his arrest, where he addressed his Father about the meaning of his life, and the future of his group of followers. He prayed "not only for these (the people there) but also for those, who, through their words, will believe in me." That means you and I, and all other Christians down through history. His first wish was that "they all may be one...as you are in me, and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was You who sent me." This prayer from 2000 years ago has resonance today: it is hard to overstate the damage done to Christianity by the public disunity of the various Churches. Think of how political parties, appealing for our votes at elections, have been wrecked in recent decades by internal disputes, and rows about what they stand for. Sadly, the same goes for us. I appreciate (as an RC priest) the importance of seeking "The Truth", but sometimes we can overplay this, and forget the fractured image we have created for those outside our religion. Most people recognize that we can't heal divisions overnight; our own RC Church has admitted its real share in the blame for the Reformation; but the fact is that we can't relax until we make our Founder's wish for unity come true.

A second idea in this gospel is that of Jesus' "Glory". He said: "I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see the glory you have given me, because you loved from before the foundation of the world." As I have written before, we always have to try to relate our faith to everyday life; but sometimes (as here) we are taken out of the everyday, and into

the world of eternity. Jesus' "glory given by the Father" was not just his amazing love for us on the cross, it was also his sublime life as the Creator God from all eternity – "before the foundation of the world". In Jesus, this creative force became one of us, and in the famous words of John 1:14, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory." In practice, this means that you and I, when we have faith, are caught-up in the unimaginable life of Jesus with his Father, and we can let our spirits soar. This idea needs more than my poor words here: it is best expressed in music, poetry, art, or great scenery. This great gift of faith is what Jesus wanted us to share in his future Church.

However, the first reading brings us back to earth with a bump. The story, in Acts 7, is about St Stephen's vision of Jesus' glory in heaven - what he described to the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin) as "the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God". To his hearers, this was simple blasphemy; he was condemned to death without any further ado. Having taken him outside, the official execution witnesses "put down their clothes at the feet of a young man called Saul". Yes, that is the person who became St Paul, later the great apostle of the Divine Jesus. Just then, Saul was learning to become the Christian-baiter-in-chief. How ironic that he would do more than anyone to spread belief in Jesus as the Son of God! Yet that is how God often uses us in strange ways.

What should we make of this weekend in the Church year? I have never believed in telling people what they should 'feel' – we are all too different and grown-up for that. On the other hand, this is the boundary-weekend between our Lord being physically in the world with his apostles (& others) and his spiritual presence brought by the Holy Spirit in the Church. Can I suggest these ideas? (1) How far is my faith 'personal' – really part of me, not just something I've picked up or inherited? (2) If I do accept the risen Christ, how far does he affect my behaviour & relationships? (3) What is my attitude to my Church? Despite its warts & scandals, it's been the means of bringing me to Jesus, and Him to me, especially in the sacraments. (4) Jesus promised he wouldn't leave us as 'orphans' – so, can I accept that his spiritual presence in the Church is true and valid, even though I can't grasp him with my senses?

One of the great sights of Europe is the view of Durham Cathedral from the train. Like all churches, from greatest to least, it was built, not just to house a congregation, but also as a sign of faith in the unseen God and his divine Son. Next weekend, we celebrate the power that came "from on high" to make that faith possible.

Fr Jim Dunne.