

Today is the last Sunday in the Easter season. Pentecost is next Sunday, May 23. And then our own feast day, Trinity Sunday follows that. We have also just passed Ascension Day which was this past Thursday. A lot of feasting in a short period of time!

It's beginning to feel like time for feasting is here and fasting is over. With the new CDC report just out saying that in many cases we can now take off our masks it feels like time to celebrate indeed! We've had a lovely Easter season this year with springtime flowers, tulips and the leaves on trees all opening. And we have been able to open our doors and get out of our houses. These are welcome changes indeed.

Our readings today indicate changes on the horizon as well. For the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles, they were electing a new member to complete their even dozen. Matthias is the chosen man for the job. Too bad that the disciples didn't give God a chance to perhaps choose a woman for the position. They only cast lots for one of two male candidates put forward. But that's OK. The Holy Spirit will do what the disciples didn't see as a possibility. As our stained-glass windows depict, Lydia and Dorcas would become female disciples in the early Church, both in their words and in their deeds.

Change is on the horizon in our Gospel reading from John today too. Jesus prays to God for the disciples. He is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane as he prepares for his arrest. The crucifixion, resurrection and ascension lay ahead for Jesus in this passage. And he wanted those disciples who he loved, knew and called friends, to know his prayer.

So Jesus prayed out loud as the disciples listened and John recorded the prayer so that we can hear it too through his Gospel. He prayed that we all might be one, not different sects, denominations and classes of Christians. What Jesus was doing was drawing them and us all together with God in his prayer. He was focusing the heart of God on us, and the hearts of the disciples and ourselves, on God.

In reading and thinking on the Gospel reading one verse especially stood out for me. "...and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world." (John 17:14)

As Jesus prayed he reminded the disciples that they have been given knowledge of God's Truth, Peace, Wisdom and Justice. They knew that the world in which they lived was not a place of peace truth wisdom or justice. Jesus says that those who follow him are not of this world.

But what does that mean? Of course we are of the world. We are born here, live here, and most of us will not be taking a rocket ride to another planet. So, we will also die here. The world that Jesus call us to is one where God prevails and God's will is done.

Paul gives this a little more nuance when he writes to the Romans. His writing was decades before the Gospel of John was written, and so Paul must have heard the sayings of Jesus that were passed down to him from the original disciples. Paul tells the Christians in Rome *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect."* (Rom. 12:2)

If you were leaving on a long voyage and your family and friends gathered around to say goodbye, perhaps you'd take time to pray together weaving all the themes that are important to your group: how you feel about each other, what you hope they'll do in your absence; to take care of each other, to steer clear of mine fields and people who can draw you into divisiveness. The world is a dangerous place, Jesus tells the disciples. Ask for God's help and direction. Keep your hearts and minds on the prize, peace, truth, and love.

In my own travels this summer I was hoping to go to the Holy Land to take a course at St. George's College in Jerusalem. I've had to cancel that now. The college is only a few blocks from the Damascus Gate of the Old City, the scene of some of the violence that has occurred over the last couple of weeks in Israel and Gaza. It has been a very long and deep-seated animosity between Arabs and Israelis in the Holy Land. It is borne out of people of three religions struggling to live together.

Let us pray for all who live in Israel and Palestine. And let us hold especially dear in our hearts the Christians who live in cities and towns of Israel and the West Bank. And yes, Christians in those towns are Arabs who speak Arabic. Their Christian worship is in Arabic language. We pray for our Christian brothers and sisters in the Churches of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem. These churches are in Ramallah, Jaffa, Nablus, Nazareth, and Haifa, just to name a few. Their Episcopal Cathedral is on the same grounds as St. George's College in Jerusalem.

So when we know that Jesus has prayed for us in the garden, how will that help shape our prayers? Just as we are anticipating the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the feast of Pentecost that same spirit will connect us wherever we are. The ascended Jesus is now with us all...the world over, to connect us to each other and keep us safe in the palms of his hands.