

St Mary's, Barton-upon-Humber: Readings, prayers and notices for the week May 24-31

Collect for the Seventh Sunday of Easter (Sunday after the Ascension)

O God the King of glory,
you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: we beseech you, leave us not comfortless, but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us and exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

or

Risen, ascended Lord, as we rejoice at your triumph,
fill your Church on earth with power and compassion,
that all who are estranged by sin may find forgiveness and know your peace,
to the glory of God the Father.

Readings: Acts 1.6-14; Psalm 68.1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11; John 17.1-11

Meditation

This Sunday, we commemorate the lives of two extraordinary and inspirational men who, driven by their love for the gospel and their belief in social justice, brought about astonishing changes in the history of the Christian Church. I refer to the brothers, John and Charles Wesley (Charles being largely known for his 7,000 hymns).

In 1738, John was ordained as an Anglican priest and soon began an itinerant ministry without parish boundaries. This did not endear him to the Church of England, with the result that he often preached outside, in churchyards and fields, to crowds numbering tens of thousands. His work encompassed liturgical revision, training of ministers, organisation of local societies, education of the masses, and concern for the welfare of the poor. His theology demanded a methodical approach to the attainment of Christian perfection and holiness. His societies became 'Methodist' Societies, from which the Methodist Church was born.

Amazingly, John Wesley preached 42,400 sermons (averaging 15 per week). To do so, he travelled throughout England on horseback, covering 250,000 miles in his lifetime. However, his message was not new. Wesley himself stated: 'My doctrines are simply the common fundamental principles of Christianity. [...] They are the plain old religion of the Church of England.'

However, what Wesley did have was an obsessive drive to self-understanding. This honed his Christian spirituality to a level that was unheard of in the 18th century. Indeed, he used the topic, known as Wesley's 'Theology of Christian Perfection', in a sermon delivered in Oxford in 1744, berating the university and the Church for their 'nominal religious faith'.

Wesley's concept of holiness was not 'sinless perfection'. Instead, it was having 'a pure intention of heart', which he saw encapsulated in one word 'love'; drawing on the first of Christ's commandments: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' (Matt. 22.37). Wesley further taught that holiness meant loving all of creation, as doing so leads to God; thereby extending Christ's second commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22.39) to include all of creation in that love. For Wesley, Christian perfection meant 'everywhere seeing him that is invisible'.

This is how Wesley saw God's gift of Grace being available to everyone, regardless of their standing in life. It was a form of 'social holiness'; a forerunner of what we call the 'social gospel', which underpins the 21st century concept of 'social justice'. For Wesley, Christian perfection is

'perfection in love'; it is a 'holiness of heart and life', supported by the ritual of the Eucharist. He saw works of mercy as means of expressing love for one's neighbour, thereby demonstrating God's grace within the giver, and transforming the recipient to become a manifestation of God's grace. For Wesley, works of mercy are both 'an expression of holiness and a way to become more holy' for both the giver and receiver. This is a fundamental foundation for building the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth, a primary desire of God as encapsulated in the Lord's Prayer Which takes me to the Bible readings for this Sunday, the Sunday after Ascension Day; readings that are also prescient of the events we are experiencing in terms of the Covid-19 pandemic: 'Keep alert', says Peter, 'know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering' (1 Peter 5.8-9). Indeed, they are, but Covid-19 is not what these readings are about. They are as much about the continuing human journey towards perfection.

'Are we nearly there yet?', the disciples are essentially asking in Acts 1.6, as they struggle to understand when Jesus will restore the kingdom. It is not surprising that they are confused. After all, they have had a difficult few weeks, with events taking place that had not been planned for – the arrest, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus were not what they were expecting when they initially set out to follow him. Now, just as they are getting to grips with his resurrection, he again disappears from their sight, this time within a cloud, and as we know, clouds in the Bible signify the presence of God. Jesus is essentially enveloped by God – God, who is yet to be revealed in full glory before humankind; God who is obscured from the disciples' vision by the fog and mist of a cloud. This is Jesus 'entering heaven'; his 'ascension' from earth.

Now, we tend to assume that the word 'ascension' means a literal movement upwards, and hence the historic depictions of Jesus rising into the sky. However, a spiritual ascension is also possible, whereby a person is elevated to a higher position within our minds. In other words, that person is held in much higher esteem – and what higher position than to be spiritually considered alongside God? In the process of his 'ascension', Jesus has simply entered God's space or dimension; a dimension that will be revealed to us in all its glory when the kingdom is re-established on earth. The clue is to be found in the words of the angels to the disciples: 'Why do you stand looking up? [...] Jesus will come in the same way as you saw him go...' (Acts 1.11); in other words, he may now be obscured from our vision, but when the time is right – when we have perfected our world – our vision will clear, the fog of the cloud will lift, and Jesus, as one with God, will be revealed to everyone.

Meanwhile, Peter tells us that we need to be humble, endure our suffering, and work to establish and strengthen our world on firmer foundations. God will help us achieve this if we trust in God and remain steadfast to our faith (1 Peter 5.9-10). This is what Jesus was praying we would do after he left us; that by his glorification, we would follow his teaching and example, and thereby, ultimately, see God. Jesus had 'finished the work' God had sent him to do; he showed us the way - the rest is up to us. If we want eternal life, glorified in the presence of God, then our task now is to create heaven on earth (John 17.2-4); for eternal life is found not just after death, but in the world in which we now live.

Covid-19 has presented us with a turning point. In 1 Peter 4.12-14, we read 'Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you [...] because the spirit of God is resting on you'. Perhaps, two centuries after his death, it is time to revive John Wesley's 'Theology of Christian Perfection' - for the Church to use the Spirit of God and this 'turning

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point' to make a clear and distinct contribution to the world around us; a contribution to perfect ourselves and the world in which we live; a contribution to reveal the heaven in which our earth is encompassed and so that we might see 'him that is invisible'. It is what Jesus (and John Wesley) called on us to do, assuming that we are 'listening with the ear of our heart'.

Yours in Christ

Fr Robert

For your prayers

Church: Chaplains in the NHS. For the transformation of lives within our communities and families. For the Anglican Communion worldwide.

World: Health workers, all those involved in keeping essential services running. Our own political leaders. Those charged with peace-keeping and peace-making. The governments & peoples of China, Syria and the Middle East, North Africa. All seeking to resolve the issues surrounding protection of the environment, of infection control and of migrancy.

Our Community: Our local politicians. The local authority & public utilities. Public transport authorities and workers.

Those in need: Those whose lives or livelihoods are endangered by Coronavirus. Those who fear the prospect of isolation. All who live in areas of conflict or tension; the homeless, the poor, the sick, the enslaved, the hungry and the abused. Victims of terrorism.

Those for whom our prayers are asked: Melissa Milbourn, Julie Newton, Penny Archer, Vicky Page-Chestney, Kate Eaton, Mike Page-Chestney, Brenda Skinner, Henry Farrow, Stephen Wilkinson, Joyce Gibson, Janet Petch, David Witter, Sally, Abby, Jan, Nell.

Departed: David Redrobe, Betty Colwell, Pauline Fields, Margaret Hughes. Those who have died as a result of COVID-19 infection, especially those who work in the caring and medical communities.

Next Sunday – Pentecost

Acts 2.1-21; Psalm 104.25–35, 37; 1 Corinthians 12.3b–13; John 20.19-23

Updates

Daily Hope phone line

A Church of England initiative, Daily Hope offers music, prayers and reflections as well as full worship services from the Church of England at the end of a telephone line. The line – which is available 24 hours a day on **0800 804 8044** – has been set up particularly with those unable to join online church services during the period of restrictions in mind. It's an 0800 number, so landline calls will usually not cost you anything.

Even the French are opening up places of worship: here we still seem to be in the queue along with pubs and nail bars (so much for the Power of The Established Church :-)) but we're cautiously optimistic that some sort of access to our churches will be permitted before too long. We have already done essential marking-off to maintain Social Distancing and the hand sanitiser arrives this week

On which theme, if you have any emptied liquid soap dispensers, don't sling them – we could do with a few so we don't have to heave a 5 litre monster around the place – and if someone nighs a small dispenser to flog on the black market along with yeast and wholemeal bread flour they can only pinch a small quantity!

Foodbank is still operating, but unable to take donations in the usual manner. We are

accepting cash donations to help run things slightly differently during the present situation.

Do keep in your prayers Janet Petch, Joyce Gibson and David Witter; Joyce and Jan are back home and improving slowly, and David is getting the hang of his iPad...!

Those in need. Please help us keep our intercessions up to date and leave requests for prayer – either by email to david.rowett@lincoln.anglican.org, or the phone, or even a note through my door, and encourage others likewise.

This week...

... let's hear it for the Anglo-Saxons.. And the French. And Italians....

A good clutch of people to celebrate this week: on Monday, **the Venerable Bede**, 'The Father of English History' (d.735) Despite probably never travelling further than York from his monastery at Jarrow, Bede's scholarship was phenomenal, producing not only the first history book of the English (though admittedly it has a decidedly religious, anti-Celtic slant) but commentaries, works of science and a biography of St Cuthbert, using eye-witnesses of the life of the great Northern saint who had died only 30 years previously. He's buried in Durham Cathedral under the inscription '*Hac sunt in fossa Bedæ venerabilis ossa,*' which means '*In this here ditch lie old Bede's bones,*' a few yards west of the tomb of St Cuthbert himself. The wall above his tomb carries a glorious quote from his Commentary on the Revelation to St John: '*Christ is the morning star who when the night of this world is past brings to his saints the promise of the light of life and opens everlasting day.*' (Picture at <https://www.stpeters-wearmouth.org.uk/bedes-tomb/>)

Tuesday continues a procession of Anglo-Saxon Benedictines, except this one is probably Italian. **Augustine of Canterbury** (not to be confused with Augustine of Hippo) is often credited with bringing the Gospel to Britain in 597, something which would have surprised the Christians of Roman Britain (who may have left traces at Horkstow) and upset the Celtic Christians no end. Sent by the (Benedictine!) Pope Gregory the Great (of '*Not Angles, but Angels*' fame) he arrived (reluctantly) in Kent, a kingdom with strong links with the continent and a Christian queen. Although his arrogance caused a split with the British bishops who met him, he nevertheless brought Christianity in England more into line with the rest of the world. And if ever you wondered why the Primate is based at *Canterbury* and not London – London was the original intention, but Canterbury already being a Christian-sympathetic place....

The Italian ex-lawyer **Lanfranc** yet *another* Benedictine monk, from being Abbot of St Stephen's Caen, was *not* an Anglo-Saxon – he became Archbishop of Canterbury when the Saxon Stigant was deposed in 1070, and was zealous in replacing Saxon clergy with Norman ones. He was one of the few who could keep William Rufus under control, and worked to keep the English Church out of some of the worst continental squabbles between the Papacy and monarchs.

And finally, **Joan of Arc** is remembered on Saturday. It took her until 1920 to be made a saint, but she was declared innocent and acknowledged as a martyr after a retrial in 1556, at which her late prosecutor was condemned for having convicted an innocent woman in pursuit of a secular vendetta. The trial was so politically motivated – to secure a conviction she was tried for *cross-dressing* - that the paperwork from it was used as evidence in her canonisation process a century ago.

I would have mentioned **John and Charles Wesley**, commemorated today — but Robert beat me to it! And neither of them were Benedictines anyway..... :-)