

This Sunday, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, stands between two festivals of the Christian Church that share a common theme of movement. Last Thursday was Ascension Day. Next Sunday is observed as the Feast of Pentecost, when we remember the gift of the Holy Spirit, the promised Counsellor, the one who would, as Jesus promised, guide them into all the truth.

Ascension, on first reading seems to speak of disengagement, of Jesus distancing himself from his followers. Pentecost speaks of re-engagement, God drawing close to his Church in a very close and special way.

What we are talking of here, if you think about it, is a different sort of relationship. Prior to his Ascension, Jesus' physical presence had been a vital aspect of his relationship with his followers. He had been the teacher, the healer, the one who drew close to the leper, the despised, the rejected. They had been witnesses, ones who shared – but for all that ones who stood on the wings in a supportive role. Even after his death, a vital aspect of their experience of the resurrection was that the risen Jesus was identifiably one with the Jesus who had been crucified.

Our Gospel passage is drawn from that final prayer John tells us of Jesus praying with his disciples before he went out with them into the darkness of Gethsemane, the darkness of betrayal and failure.

In that prayer he speaks of the disengagement of Ascension, a disengagement, that in the mind of John, had already begun. Jesus is leaving the world, but the

disciples are staying. From now on they are to be in the front line. It is they who will bear the brunt of the world's hostility. In this prayer Jesus asks a number of things of the Father on behalf of the disciples.

He asks that they be protected. This does not mean that they are to be isolated from the trials of this world – rather that they will be strengthened to enable them to face these trials.

He asks that they be sanctified in the truth. Sanctification always carries connotations of being set apart. This addresses the basic issue of identity and what we see as our purpose. Our basic identity is to be found in the Word, in Jesus as the Word made flesh, in the word that Jesus taught, in the word that the Church proclaims in Jesus' name.

Of course there are other very proper identities – those of family, of community, of nation. But these are all to be lived in the context of that fundamental allegiance to Christ. There will be occasions when the demands of these different identities clash, when we feel the tension, the hostility of which Jesus spoke. We are assured that we seek to stay with God, so God will stay with us.

The portion from Acts speaks of a community that is preparing for the work that lies ahead. The disciples have returned from the Mount of Ascension to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. Following the death of Judas, the disciples feel the need to fill his place. They seek one who has been a witness of Jesus,

one who has shared their life with Jesus. The choice finally settles on Matthias. We know nothing of Matthias before this and we shall hear nothing of him again. Luke clearly feels that his appointment is enough to include him in his story.

As I reflect on this passage two important truths come through to me as I think on that group preparing for a ministry that was to take them and their message to the far corners of the Roman Empire, a message for which the majority were to give their lives.

First, God's work is not confined by my failure. Judas had been called and had failed. God raised up another, Matthias, to take his place. God's purposes are bigger than any one of us. God can work, God has worked powerfully through individuals but no one is indispensable. We are God's servants, God's instruments in the work of the Kingdom. I would see that not just in terms of an antidote to any tendency to arrogance on my part but also an assurance that God can work with my imperfections. For all the disciples, not just Judas, were imperfect, had weaknesses. But here they are, chosen by Jesus, waiting to fulfil his command to take the Gospel to the far corners of the Roman Empire.

Which takes me to my second observation. of most of the men gathered in that room that night we will hear no more. We will hear a great deal of the results of their work. In the first century after these events the Church will spread throughout the Roman Empire. The Biblical record tells mainly of the work of

Peter and Paul, a few other names crop up from time to time. What is clear is the existence of a large number of people meeting in small groups in people's homes in different parts of the Empire, each in their own way, in a range of often difficult circumstances bearing their own witness to Christ. Yes, God has used spiritual giants such as Luther, as Cranmer and Wesley and Calvin in the advancement of his Kingdom; but alongside those are the unknown, the unsung heroes of the Christian Church who have borne patient witness, who have played their part in the advancement of the Kingdom.

We leave the disciples in the room that night, waiting, waiting for the start of their mission, waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. herein lies the secret of their success. It did not lie in the particular strengths or virtues they may have had (though I am sure they had many); it most certainly did not lie in worldly distinction. It lay in their readiness to wait upon God.

That should set the tone of our life before God. We are a community not of this world that has been called to live in this world. We bring ourselves to the Lord in our strengths and in our weaknesses and wait upon him. He will take us and work through us, warts and all. What he asks is not our strength (for he will supply that) but our availability and our willingness to be used in his service and for his glory.