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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : Sunday after Ascension
Sunday 29th May 2022

SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION

A few years ago, I visited someone who had suffered a major trauma in her life. It had really affected her and she had become a shadow of her former self. On my visit she told me that she had woken up one morning and decided that she was going to try and change. She was going to make a supreme effort to become more positive. She went on to tell me that she came across a saying in a paper which had been penned by a Danish philosopher called Kierkegaard. He wrote this: “Life can only be understood backwards”. But her paper had been torn at the corner and she was curious about what was missing – and she managed to find the lost bit – which suddenly made perfect sense. What he wrote was “Life can only be understood backwards” – and had finished with “but must be lived forwards”. “Life can only be understood backwards but must be lived forwards”. For her that was the catalyst that she needed to move on from the past and she never looked back.

As we reach the final part of Jesus’ great prayer before his arrest, as John records it in today’s Gospel reading, we cannot fail to be moved by the heartfelt words of Jesus – and we realise how much he is trying to help his disciples sort out their life’s priorities, to look ahead with positive optimism, understanding the past by moving

forward. He was devoted to his companions, and longed for them to become bound to God and to one another as they had already begun to be when in his company. And then it dawns on us that **we** are the ones who have come to belief through the witness of the apostles; we become aware of past generations who have handed down the succession to us. It is why it is always good for a church when new members are prepared for confirmation, confirming the promises made on their behalf at their baptism but making these promises for themselves as they look forwards.

You don't need me to underline that there is a great air of excitement in the readings today and also because there is a clear realisation that we don't have to **wait** to start living this new Resurrection life, which Jesus promised. We can begin to change, **right now**.

In our reading from Acts, we see the effects of Pentecost (the feast we will celebrate next week), graphically described by Luke, the writer of Acts. It seems that Paul and Silas were at first content to let the slave girl direct people to the truth about them, but as it went on for days they must have found it getting to them. The imprisoning effect of this spirit on the poor girl must also have been increasingly obvious. Ironically it is for liberating someone that these friends are beaten black and blue and thrown into prison.

And what do they do there? They sit, bruised and bleeding in the painful shackles – and sing their hearts out, praising God. That is living the new life. That unquenchable, bubbling joy in real, lasting things is what other people notice. That night it changed the lives of the jailer and his entire family, and quite possibly some

of the other prisoners as well. They had discovered the reality of where their priorities should be placed.

Increasingly as we live our lives, we discover where our priorities really should lie. Talk to a young person facing exams – and they will (hopefully) tell you where their priorities are. Talk to a young couple, planning to get married, and they will find their priorities have changed. Talk to a couple who have a new baby – and their priorities have definitely changed – and so it goes on. All the time, as we encounter life-changing experiences in our lives, they can literally cause us to change our lives.

For many Christians, their lives will have been changed by an encounter with the risen and ascended Lord, whenever and however it may have happened. The disciples were changed by their experience – to the extent that they had to continue his work on earth. But it could so easily have all gone horribly wrong – for when Jesus ascended, everything was left in the hands of just 11 disciples.

What we have to realise is that the future of the church, the continuation of the Christian faith, now depends upon us. We cannot duck our responsibility and leave it to someone else. It has to be the priority for us as individuals and for us as a Church. We all have to be open and welcoming to those new to our Church. It cannot be left up to one or two individuals, or even worse, just to the Vicar. We all have the ability to encourage and this must be a priority.

Maybe we can each resolve today to get our priorities right as we celebrate the Ascension and look forward to celebrating again the feast of Pentecost, the birth of

the Church. We have the chance to start afresh, now; to understand the past but to live life forwards. Let's do that before it is too late. Amen.