

LORGUES ASCENSION DAY: May 10th 2018

TEXT: Jesus said, “Go therefore, and I am with you always even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28)

There’s a wonderful story in one of the apocryphal gospels, imagining the return of the ascended Christ to heaven where the awaiting angels joyfully receive him. But as together with Christ they look down to that mountain in Galilee where the bewildered disciples are standing looking wistfully into heaven, – a strange bunch of uneducated, largely illiterate, and somewhat ordinary working men – the angels say to Christ, something like: “But surely you can’t leave your plan for the redemption of the whole world in the hands of that lot!!” And Jesus simply says in reply, “I have no other plan.” And what Jesus said to those apprehensive angels he is still saying today: ‘I have no other plan.’”

But surely, from a purely human point of view what a very unpromising bunch of disciples they were: originally twelve, but now only eleven as Judas, had gone out and hanged himself; there was Simon Peter who at the crucial moment had lost his nerve and denied he ever knew Jesus; together with some whom we’re told still doubted and could not yet totally commit themselves.

“What on earth Jesus are you doing choosing this bunch for your inner cabinet, before you step down or are taken up. Shouldn’t you have a cabinet reshuffle first!

It’s like Paul observed about the fragile infant church in Corinth: ‘God purposefully chooses what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful.’”

But it has to be said that things were getting better for those disciples during those forty days between the resurrection and Ascension Day when the earthly Jesus was taken from them. On and off – now you see him now you don’t – Jesus had appeared to the disciples and others, walking with them, sharing a meal with them, encouraging them and giving them a crash course on the core teaching on death and resurrection as being the key to understanding the paradoxical code and key to his Kingdom, and all that in order, as he said so that they could be his witnesses to the end of the earth.”

But in all of that there was the punch line ‘And I myself will send upon you what my Father has promised. But you must wait in the city until you are clothed with the power from above, the gift my Father promised, for in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’- ten days later, in Luke’s chronology to be precise, at Pentecost.

And so they stayed together waited and prayed as Jesus commanded them and in God’s time and God’s way that strange bunch of disciples on top of the mountain of the ascension, became the first apostles of Christ’s one holy catholic and apostolic church.

Yes, indeed weak ordinary men were indeed clothed with power and transformed by the Holy Spirit just as Christ promised on that first Ascension Day.

But, what sort of power? Do you remember another mountain top experience promising power? – but a very different sort of power: ‘The devil taking Jesus up into a mountain, shewed him all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “All this power I will give to you and the glory of them for that is delivered to me and all this will be yours.”’

Two very different mountain top experiences symbolizing two very different sorts of power and both from the same word in Greek: POWER – on the one hand worldly power to overpower the kingdoms of this world, exercised, through political, economic, military and perverted religious power; or the right use of power which is experienced as authority. That's the power of which Jesus spoke on that mountain top when he said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"; self-authenticating authority, so that when Jesus taught, we're told, the ordinary people said that he spoke as one having authority and not like the religious establishment of his day, self-authenticating authority, with the ring of truth.

Sadly, it has to be said, that for large parts of the history of the church – all the churches, - whenever we've had the chance we've grasped for worldly power which Jesus rejected from Satan. We have tended (with notable exceptions) to opt for worldly power to control and dominate and rule the world (often in the name of God himself and so-called religion); rather than as Jesus taught us, to be like salt, light and leaven, acting as catalysts to transform the world, through the power and authority given to the church through the Holy Spirit, by the ascended Christ.

Well, those days have gone or are largely going at least in Western Europe where many parts of the church are shrinking numerically and where militant secularism at best is indifferent to the Gospel and at worst is positively hostile to the church, so that many of the privileges of worldly power are being stripped away from us whether we like it or not.

Nevertheless, I want to say to you today, what I believe the Spirit is saying to all the churches. This is Kairos time – God's time when at last God can get a chance to get his foot in the door of his church, to turn it inside out in order to let outsiders in. But, it's not a time to be down cast but rather a time of great opportunity for those who are willing to wait upon the Lord, to renew their strength in times of weakness so that we may mount up with wings as eagles; can run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

Furthermore, this renewal in the Spirit is happening in our day in the most unlikely places to the most unlikely people, so don't worry too much about labels – Pentecostal, Evangelical high Church, low church, but rather what C. S. Lewis said he wanted – DEEP CHURCH, offering an inner life of the Holy Spirit, less dependent on material strength and worldly power, and more empowered by that life in the Spirit of the ascended Christ.

So let's take heart today as we reflect on those eleven disciples on that first Ascension Day, on that mountain top, and not least if we are feeling numerically small and insignificant, as little churches scattered around the Riviera! Take heart! It's precisely at such times in the history of the church when all among the debris of the dying institution and organisation set in stone, there begin to appear, little green shoots of new life from the living organism of the mystical body of Christ.

I truly believe that we live at such a time when as it says in the prayer, "things that were cast down are being raised up" in new forms and new expressions of church; and "things which had grown old are being made new," by the power of the one God who alone can make all things new. But always and everywhere only for those of that first beatitude who have come to know their need of God, and the power of God in their powerlessness. It is to such that the kingdom of heaven is opened and given.

But the gift of the Holy Spirit is not just a one-off big bang. Any Pentecost is just the kick-start. It's much more a matter of growing and deepening that inner life of the Spirit, rather like as when the bishop prays over the heads of all who come for confirmation, that we "may daily increase in God's Holy Spirit more and more until God has finally perfected what he first began in baptism.

And what is that new life? It's nothing less than being drawn by the love of the Holy Spirit into the very life of the Holy Trinity and not just after death, but here in the here and now; drawing directly through the ascended Christ from the source of all life and love; encircled by God's love and held in the arms of that love – a love which unconditionally accepts us as we are, so that we can be slowly remade and transformed into the children of God by the power of love.

You see Christ did not come down in his incarnation just to flirt with us, and then return to his comfort zone, but rather in his Ascension, still binding us to himself in love, Christ came down to earth to share in our humanity so that we might be taken back to God in Christ to share in his divinity. Christ took our humanity with all its pain, tragedy and darkness into the heart of God, the only place and space where it finally can be healed and transformed.

And it's in the light of all this, the promise of empowerment by the Holy Spirit; the abiding presence of Christ with us at all times and in all places until the end of time together with that authority which Christ has been given and which in turn he gives to those who are willing to be his witnesses, - it's in the light of all that and so much more, that Christ could say to his disciples as he says to us again today: "Go therefore and make disciples."

So in our Eucharist today let us pray for one another and for the dispersion of our various churches throughout the Riviera – praying for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit as we look forward to Pentecost; for a new springtime of loving and for all who live or work in the communities where we are called to serve and witness, to empowered by that same Holy Spirit for mission, for the building up of God's churches and for the forwarding of his kingdom.

As we sing in that well-known hymn:

And we, shall we be faithless,
Shall hearts fail hands hang down?
Shall we evade the conflict,
Or cast away the crown?
Not so! In God's deep counsels,
Some better thing is stored;
We shall maintain unflinching,
One Church, One Faith, One Lord.