

## **'What a Transformation'**

**BCP Eucharist, Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2017**

**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Yr A**

*Sermon by the Rev'd Dr Mike Kirby, Priest-Vicar (SSM), Chester Cathedral*

*Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21*

May I speak in the name of God; Father Son and Holy Ghost; Amen

What a transformation; what a transformation. That phrase is used so often in our everyday lives in so many different circles. It could be something as simple as the way we look; a new hair style, or a new outfit. The transformation comes from the sight of how we looked before to how we look now; sometimes radically different. But sometimes the transformation can be deeper than that. For instance, I was very fortunate to be invited to dinner on Friday, by some lovely people – people I have only just met. The conversation flowed to all manner of things; one of which was a forthcoming family wedding for them. New dresses and outfits for many for this very special occasion. The father very proudly showed a picture of his young teenage daughter in her beautiful new dress. The pride and love within him was clear to see; yes, because of the transformation from the dress – but also something deeper. He acknowledged that suddenly this wasn't his young daughter anymore – here now was a beautiful young lady; not just because of the dress, but suddenly transforming through her whole life. The Christian faith in all of us helped us to know and believe – this was God's beautiful hand at work. Transformation in the lives of our young people as they grow up.

As another example of that deeper transformation, only yesterday, in the refectory here, I got to chatting with a lovely group from San Antonio Texas. It transpired that one of them was also a lecturer, teaching like me, students in the healthcare professions; for her nurses, myself radiographers – but for both of us in the field of cancer therapy. We had a lovely conversation on the joys of doing so, of teaching young minds, if only for those ‘light bulb moments’ as she mentioned, when our students change, they transform; from a place of merely acquiring knowledge to one of actually understanding the concepts; beginning to think through the scenarios and really problem solve....something needed every day in our field of medical science.

Our scriptures today highlight these deeper transformations that can take place; perhaps too the biggest there can ever be – the transformation that was the Messiah, the Son of God, fulfilling all the law and the prophets, to be our saviour. To die for us on the cross, in order to conquer death – so that we might have eternal life; an eternal hope and salvation, driven out of pure love for us. A new commandment for us, perhaps; but one which was God through and through, since the beginning of time. But the transformation wasn’t just the miracle of Christ’s birth, or the generosity of God through the miracles of Jesus’ ministry in healing the sick, the lame, the blind – as Bartimaeus experienced himself; through transforming world views of bias and division to bring justice and love for all; to bring the water of life for everyone, just as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well; so that we might never thirst again.

But this transformation was not just an historical one, merely in the time of Jesus' life on earth; amazing though that life was, especially for those whose lives he touched. As we have heard from John's gospel this morning, Jesus' leaving of his earthly presence was merely the start of the work of the Holy Spirit – in all of us. God's promise, through the work of Jesus, to leave us not alone and empty, but alive in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, the advocate, the helper, the comforter. The spirit replaces Jesus, but also becomes that helper, that comforter for the disciples, especially at this time when Jesus leaves, even though they now know of his resurrection. The spirit is that helper, that bringer of peace and truth, that the disciples especially will know and recognise – for they will have had that same feeling through abiding with Jesus; now Jesus abides in them, through the spirit. The generosity of God, which meant that God made the move that only God could make – in giving his only Son for us, goes on, in the form of his spirit. The same spirit which enabled Jesus' ministry is now bestowed upon the disciples.

St Augustine wrote, in his commentary on this portion of John's gospel, that 'Now we love when we are believing what we shall see; but then we shall love when we see what we have believed in'. The 'then' can refer to the eternal kingdom, the life everlasting – when we shall see Jesus in all his glory; and loving Jesus will simply be irresistible. But does the 'then' only refer to that glorious moment? I don't think so. And I think the section of Acts shows one example of this – a 'then' soon after Jesus has left, but evidence of the transforming power of the spirit in the shape of Paul. Is this not, for those who knew Paul in his previous life as Saul, the persecutor of those following 'the way', evidence of the transforming power of the spirit? An example of the 'then', when they can love what they see,

what they have believed in – the glorious witness to Jesus and the Good News of Christ.

For here is Paul, in front of the Areopagus – the famous Rock which in Greek mythology was where Ares was tried by the Gods for the murder of Poseidon's Son Halirrhothius; which was used in classical times for real trials of deliberate homicide. This rocky outcrop NW of the Acropolis is where Paul is preaching to the gentiles; teaching to put aside their idolatry in favour of the one true and living God. Paul uses their very own monument to an unknown God, to tell them of the God they have not known; reinforcing a philosophy that many Greeks were beginning to 'see'; the monotheism of Judaism, now the one truth through Jesus Christ, one with the Father and the Spirit. Even in these early days of the church, the transforming power of the Spirit is evidenced – by the sight and sound of Paul himself; but also by his words and preaching.

And it goes on, the transforming power of God's generous spirit still goes on – especially if we want it to. For God's generosity happens today, every day – in the modern transformations we have in our everyday lives; through the transformation that we are about to encounter now in the Eucharist; the sharing of bread and wine around the altar, that is the ultimate generosity of God, the ultimate healing that brings us back time and time again to be at one with God. If we are open to the transforming power of that spirit, that helper, that advocate; the spirit that feeds and nourishes us through the body and blood of Christ – then we too can be generous in all our doings; in our prayers, in our words, in our actions. For just as the disciples loved Jesus and kept his commandments, so too can we

reciprocate that love to the living Lord Jesus, by keeping his commandments – that we love God and love our neighbours as ourselves.

For that is what the spirit can inspire us to do, transforming us again and again, if we let it be so. Accepting Jesus into our lives, opens up our hearts and minds to the work of the spirit within us; and that work is to love others – by giving of ourselves, of our time, our energy, our resources, our love. By doing so, as Paul did, we ourselves go on to transform the lives of others through the power of that spirit. We enable the kingdom of God to come close; not just by minutes and hours, not just in time – but by actual proximity, in distance too. The kingdom comes into the most intimate of closeness – into the very lives of men and women, our brothers and sisters; especially those who are in need of our help and the spirit of grace and truth.

So we should keep our eyes open to see the transforming power of the spirit at work around us; to recognise the generosity of God which was not just historically in the scriptures, but through the spirit, the advocate, the helper, continues now in the present day. And, by accepting God's spirit, we become generous too – in all our works and words and deeds. And then, just as it was for Paul, we shall again and again experience a truly wonderful transformation!

Amen.