

## Easter 7 (after Ascension)

*They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.*

We've just heard part of what is known as the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper. John reports Jesus consecrating himself as the messianic sacrifice so that his disciples may be consecrated for their mission and be preserved in unity and truth. Adding that he is now 'coming to' the Father, he refers to the whole redemptive narrative of death, resurrection and ascension which we've been celebrating in this season. The prayer then looks *forward* to Pentecost and beyond, to the mission of the Church.

This year we have a particular focus on our own Pentecost with the arrival of a new Parish Priest and a commitment to renewing our own life and mission in this strange and beautiful church and community. I'll leave you to decide whether you are individually strange or beautiful, or possibly both. But the call of this prayer is to both those charisms and we should pray along with the Lord with special enthusiasm this year as we prepare to celebrate the completion of the Easter season at Pentecost in company with a new Vicar.

I know - Jesus doesn't explicitly pray that we should be strange and beautiful. His prayer for his disciples is for faithfulness, unity, truth and victory over evil. But are those all things not both strange and beautiful in 2021? Faithfulness is certainly counter-cultural in relational and public life, but we can still achieve it. Unity in civil society is at as high a premium as it is in the Church, but we can model it to others if we make the effort. Truth is no longer valued by those who lead us: all the more reason why we should seek to reinstate it in the smaller compass of our lives. Victory over evil seems a more difficult outcome to ensure, but we can leave that to God if we seek to be faithful, unified and truthful. In our dealings with each other it can only build up the Body of Christ and the Kingdom if we stop and think about whether we are promoting faithfulness, unity and truth before we speak or act.

The building in which we worship is undoubtedly beautiful; we who are over-familiar with it no longer see it as strange. But I've had the privilege, less often recently but more often again soon, of welcoming visitors into it who are powerfully surprised. Occasionally the first sight of the interior, after the not especially impressive approach from Margaret St, elicits words which I won't repeat from the pulpit. It is not what people expect from the dear old CofE, in a Fitzrovia street that seems to lead nowhere in particular. It is *strange* all this; not comfortable, domestic or tame. That's a good thing. But a better thing will be when the welcome people receive here and the growth they experience if they come back is equally surprising to them, surprising in a good way compared with their experience of the world: strange and beautiful is the point of this place. All attempts to domesticate it over the past century and a half have failed: Butterfield's vision reasserts itself with iron determination. And that is because his vision was a Christian vision, a generous-spirited alternative to the dullness, greed and self-importance of conventional society.

In today's gospel Jesus speaks of entrusting his glory to us. What an extraordinary gift we have received, from him in our baptism and from our forebears in this ark of a building. St Paul tells us that we hold our treasure, Christ, in earthenware vessels, our bodies; that too is strange and beautiful. The unpromising exterior and jewel-box interior of this church are a parable of that, just as the humble bread of the Mass, is another, reserved there in that extraordinary sacrament house, Christ's permanent presence with us in fulfilment of his promise.

A few verses after this gospel passage, Jesus prays

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one (17.22)

What is that glory? St Irenaeus, writing only a century and a half after the resurrection, wrote that ‘the glory of God is a human being fully alive.’ Irenaeus wasn’t describing Californian-style self-realization there. Fr John Behr, the Orthodox theologian who is coming to speak to us this Advent, has shown how, in the words ‘a human being fully alive’, Irenaeus was talking about our risen life achieved after our death, joined to Christ; he was glimpsing that vision glorious with which Butterfield sought to surround us here, and which we are called to share.

We are to care for the earthenware jars which are our bodies not as selfie-fodder but as a chrysalis of what is to come; equally we care for and love this place not as a museum but as a font giving birth to new life.

Today Jesus prays for his disciples, for us,

They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

A new incumbency is a moment to look outward as well as forward; we’ve necessarily been introspective in the months of pandemic and vacancy in the benefice. A new Vicar is not part of that past and our calling is not to be constantly reminding him of it. As we approach Pentecost together let us pray that we can be truly strange and beautiful for the world that does not know the strangeness and beauty of God’s mercy and love.