

Sunday 21st May 2023; Holy Communion , Stonegrave and Gilling.

On Ascension Day I referred in my sermon to the disciple's staying together to worship God and pray after Jesus had departed and we are reminded of that again today in the further reading from Acts. This reminds us that one thing we should always do in our services and when we are together is pray because Jesus promises, whenever two or three are together He is with them.

Prayer is fundamental to our life and faith and relationship with God. Simply put, prayer is conversing with God. Not just talking but listening. The latter is being quiet before God. The former is saying what's in your heart.

Prayer is not an intellectual demonstration or about showing to other how pious and devout you think you are; it is about releasing yourself in your heart to God whatever that might mean regardless of the consequences. Most of us know what it is to hear a true man or woman of God deep in prayer; there is something holy and awesome about it because their prayers come from the heart.. In our Gospel today Jesus prayed to His God and Father, which is the only long, continuous prayer of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. The sentences are simple, but the ideas are deep, moving, and meaningful.

Genuine prayer often reveals a person's innermost being, comes from the heart. John 17 is a unique opportunity to see the heart of Jesus. In this prayer, Jesus will touch on many of themes developed in this Gospel: glory, witness, testimony, knowing and believing, love. By his Resurrection and Ascension Jesus returns to the heavenly glory that God prepared for him in love, and Jesus prays

that his followers will one day join him in the Father's presence to share in this glory and love.

We are told Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven, signifying him lifting his heart and soul to God in prayer. In our Holy Communion we have the proclamation and challenge of the *sursum corda* to 'lift up your hearts' which was anciently used as a call to prayer, literally meaning "Up with your hearts".

In ancient times, the word 'heart' denoted the centre of all physical and spiritual life. the fountain and seat of the thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, endeavours of understanding, the faculty and seat of the intelligence, of the will and character, of the soul so far as it was affected and stirred in a bad way or good'. The heart was the seat of the sensibilities, affections, emotions, desires, passions, vigour, and fullness of life.

'Heart' (or the Greek word, 'kardia') then, did not refer to the physical organ but was always used figuratively in Scripture to refer to our true self made in the image of God. The heart was therefore the centre of the personality, the "control centre", if you will, of our being. It controlled the intellect, emotions, motivations and will. So spiritually it followed that no outward characteristics were of the slightest value unless the heart was turned to God.

'Kardia' of course, gives us our medical terms today such as cardiac, cardiovascular, cardiologist, etc. illustrating just as the integrity of our physical heart is vital to the continuance of our physical life, in a similar and even more important way the integrity of our spiritual heart is vital to our spiritual life, for our spiritual life impacts not just our enjoyment of time but on us eternally.

In the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, God says to him, 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you'.

The 'control centre', the self-centred 'heart of stone', the stubborn, senseless, intractable heart, that shows no kindness and rejects all offers of grace, is replaced with a 'heart of flesh' one that can *feel*, and that can *enjoy*; that can experience the love to God and give it out, and be a home for the Spirit of the living God where God promises to fill the believer with His presence and power .

This is the spiritual transformation promised in the new covenant. Instead of the law working from the outside in, God promised a new heart to work from the inside out. Jesus referred to this spiritual transformation when he spoke of being *born again*. Paul spoke of it when he wrote of believers being new creations in Jesus Christ when men and women are made new, with a new nature patterned after the nature of Jesus Himself.

This is what happens when we truly 'lift up our hearts' and our old heart is transformed, as in the Book of the Revelation we are told that the one who is sitting on the throne says, 'Behold, I make all things new'.

Yet, we must allow that to happen, we must choose to give up our old heart and accept the new one given to us. The word we translate as repent, 'metanoia' literally means, 'change of heart or mind'. This is beautifully illustrated in the famous 1853 painting by Holman Hunt *The Light of the World*. In it Christ, dressed in royal robes, is shown in a garden at midnight, holding a lantern in his left hand, and knocking on a heavily panelled door with his right. This painting is rich in spiritual symbolism because it originated from Hunt's own experience of conversion. When the painting was unveiled a critic remarked to the painter, "*Mr. Hunt, the work is unfinished. There is no handle on the door.*" Hunt answered, "*That is the door to the human heart. It can be opened only from the inside.*" *Christ does not force*

Himself upon you. He waits outside the door of your heart.'

Today then maybe is the day to ask yourself, have you opened your heart to Christ, sought fellowship with Him in true prayer, enabled Him to make His home in your heart?

If you are not sure, may I humbly ask you then to 'lift up your heart'.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed Alleluia.
Amen.