

Sunday of the Ascension, Sunday, June 2nd, 2019

Readings: Acts 11:1-11, Psalm 47, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 28:16-20

Becoming Gods

Introduction

Let me tell you a story. Some of you may have heard it, some not. It is a bit risqué, a bit earthy, inelegant, but funny: it never fails to raise a laugh. By 1986, I had been working as a missionary in Latin America for about 2 years. In July of that year, there was a meeting, an ecumenical meeting of Protestants and Catholics from across the continent, in the capital city of Argentina, Buenos Aires. It was a rare event, given the historical antipathy between Protestants and Catholics in that continent, and for that reason, a significant surprise. But that was not the only surprise. Of more significance – at least personally – was that I was invited to address the meeting of about 200, possibly due to the novelty of an Australian in Latin America. I took up the challenge, I took up the adventure, and did my best. All went well, until I mistook a word: and not just once but several times. In speaking about “Papal Bulls” (“*bulas papales*” in the Spanish, meaning a public decree of the Papacy), I had inadvertently referred to the pope’s private parts, with the words “Papal Balls” (“*bolas papales*”). The first uttering was met with death like silence, the second, with disbelief, the third, with laughter and the kind and humorous intervention of the Nuncio – who personally represents the Pope, whispering to me “*Pastor, la palabra correcta es bulas no bolas*” – *Pastor, the correct word is bulls not balls*”. What I said that day, what scholarly insights I offered, has long been lost, but I am told, the joke is still shared about the young, Australian, *gringo* pastor. Why do I tell you this story? For this reason: that it was an adventure, it was exciting, it was an opportunity, which I grasped and ran with. Of course, I messed it up a bit, but it is still remembered as a highlight of the first ecumenical meeting in Buenos Aires. Indeed, some years later, when Jorge Bergoglio, became the new archbishop of Buenos Aires – now Pope Francis I – ecumenical meetings became a priority. I am not sure that I can claim any credit for that.

Easter faith is adventurous faith, Easter faith is about courage, taking risks, doing new things, thinking in new ways. Does it mean that mistakes are made? Of course! But at least we know we are alive, not looking back, preoccupied with the preservation of a Christian tradition, alone, but rather bent upon re-explaining it, reinterpreting it in the light of changing history, changing events.

The Readings

These last weeks of the Easter season we have been hearing stories about a Christian Church that was adventurous. One of those stories was about Peter and his awakening to the possibility of the fact that God had a bigger ambition than simply a Christian church that remained behind the barricades of Jewish identity, that remained attached to the synagogue. We also know that the apostle Paul, was considerably more adventurous than Peter: when Peter lacked courage to pursue the new vision of Church that would transcend Jewish identity, Paul, held “his feet to the fire”. Paul carried the load of doing the the new theological thinking, that led the Church from its narrowness, buried in its tradition, in which it would have surely died, to a new, generous, broad way of seeing itself in the world. Rather than defensiveness, Paul’s theological view was extensive, inclusive and radical.

Our reading today from the Acts of the Apostles, is all about this. Let us review it! The time has come for Jesus’ ascension, his return to God. As we know, the departure of Jesus after his resurrection, was cathartic for the believers. They felt deserted, insecure, and with their insecurity, paralysed. This was not the only time when the Church felt this way. The drama in John’s Gospel for example, some 70 years later, was also about a Jesus who had not returned as they had expected. John’s Gospel is really all about, appealing to the Christians of that community, to not return to the synagogue, defeated, but to adventurously, step out, articulate the Christian faith in new ways. And so, they did. Those new ways of explaining Jesus, became what we embrace today.

But I divert: back to the reading! In the face of Jesus' departure, the words of the angels ring out: "*You Galileans! why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly – and mysteriously – as he left.*". The point is to wait for the Spirit, the Enabler to arrive, in order to get on with the job. The point is, to not look backward, but forward. The point is, to be adventurous, not to cower. The point is, to look forward to the kingdom, not just backward to tradition. The point is, to create, to reinterpret the faith in new circumstances, not to just repeat it and preserve it. The point, is to *become gods, trusted by God*, as we journey forward, shaping the Christian faith, and human history.

Shaping the World and National Reconciliation Week

At the time of Ascension Sunday, we are also in National Reconciliation Week, when we focus upon the place of indigenous Australians. In 1967 – before I could vote – Australia held a referendum to count, to statistically include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as citizens, and to legislate on their behalf through the Commonwealth, rather than the states; all of which had, chequered histories when it came to indigenous issues. It was a time of hope, the churches all supported it and led it – and correctly so – the new vision, where we thought that Australia would progress to a new relationship of fairness and justice with its historical peoples. But it failed to deliver, and today our indigenous policy is poor, lacking vision, lacking substance. The Christian doctrine of the Ascension however, again points us forward: from repeating and preserving the past inadequacies and oppression, to something new: a new adventure in indigenous relationships.

Sure, I made errors back in Buenos Aires. However, that first meeting became the beginning of many. It became an 'ascension moment', a creative moment in ecumenical relationships in Latin America

The Ascension is about *becoming gods*, free and trusted by our Lord, to be adventurous, to create a world in keeping with the kingdom.