

Exegetical Notes for June 2019

June's Exegetical notes are from The Reverend Clara King
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June 2, 2019 – Ascension

Acts 1:1-11

Ascension is properly celebrated 10 days before Pentecost. According to Acts 1:3, Jesus appeared to the disciples over 40 days; the Jewish feast of Pentecost is celebrated 50 days after the Passover, so Ascension is always the Thursday before the 7th Sunday of Easter. This tradition works wonderfully in big churches who can put on a Thursday evening service and people will attend. In our small churches these days (including most city churches in our Diocese!), it's more practical to celebrate Ascension on the Sunday before Pentecost. That way we don't miss out on this important moment in our story.

Our reading from Acts for Ascension ends with the disciples staring up into heaven, trying to spot Jesus, and a pair of angels appearing to them. "Why do you stand looking up into heaven?" the angels ask them. "Jesus will come to you again, in the same way he was taken from you." It is as if the angels are saying, quite pointedly, "don't you have ministry to be getting on with?"

It is a good reminder that our calling as the Church is not to stand staring always up into heaven. Down here on earth, there's ministry for us to do.

But perhaps like us, the disciples didn't know exactly what ministry they were to be getting on with. If we continue reading the rest of Acts 1, we'll find that when the disciples returned to Jerusalem, they didn't throw themselves into whatever ministry opportunities came to hand. Instead, they devoted themselves to prayer, and to asking who among their number was called to leadership. And they waited for God to open their eyes and their hearts and make their ministry clear.

Jesus has ministry for your congregation to do down here, while we're waiting for his return. How are you asking for God to show us the ministry he is calling you to? Who among your number is God calling into leadership, who can help you find the way forward? Have you as a congregation ever met one of those angels who says, "why are you standing here looking up into heaven"? These are perhaps some of the more uncomfortable angels to meet. Sometimes we don't like to hear this message and we

shoo them away. How have you responded to these angels when you've met them?
How is God preparing your eyes and your hearts as a congregation to be open to the
ministry he will call you to?

June 9, 2019 – Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

We often misunderstand the opening line of this text, “when the day of Pentecost had come”. Pentecost was a Jewish feast, 50 days after Passover - yet another historical testament to Christianity’s Jewish family history. It is called Shavuot, the festival of the harvest, when the first sheaves of wheat were gathered and dedicated at the Temple.*

I wonder whether the disciples had any heart for Shavuot on that day, only 10 days after Jesus had been taken up from them? Acts 1 tells us that they were praying continually, but presumably they didn’t enter the Temple. The Temple was, after all, staffed by people who had vigorously persecuted Jesus (for geopolitical reasons related to Roman oppression). The disciples had every reason in the world to avoid the Temple and keep themselves safely hidden. So it’s fair to guess that this festival had rather lost its meaning for them this year, even though they’d celebrated it all their lives.

All the people streaming past their doors on the way to the Temple to offer their harvest - people from all over the Jewish world: Parthians, Medes, Elamites and so on - what did they know about the events that had transpired in Jerusalem these past several weeks? They were at best, ignorant; at worst, dangerous. And to be avoided at all costs.

So the disciples stayed holed up in that upper room, praying continually, and ignoring the festival happening outside their doors. This year, it just seemed stale.

There are times in our all lives where the rituals we’ve celebrated year after year seem to be stale. But look what God does here: God introduces to Peter and the other disciples a new meaning of the “feast of the harvest”! “From now on, you will be fishers of people,” says Jesus in Matthew 4:19. “The harvest is plenty, but the workers are few”, he says in Matthew 9:37. And what happens, on that day of Pentecost? After praying ceaselessly for God to open their eyes and their hearts to the ministry God is calling them to do, the disciples receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and look outside their window, and discover all the people to whom they are called to minister. They discover the harvest, lying in wait, all around them. A festival that was about bringing the harvest to God becomes turned on its head: God instead brings the harvest to them. And lo! they are equipped with every good gift they need to take up this ministry.

As Cameron Harder writes, “ ‘Surprise!’ should be our Easter greeting.” Surprise that death didn’t finish Jesus. Surprise that it wasn’t the end of the movement, it was only

the beginning. Surprise that God took a religious practice that seemed to have lost its importance in the disciples' lives and turned it completely on its head. "Surprise! instead of you bringing the harvest to me in the Temple, I'll bring it to you, wherever you are," said God to the disciples on the day of Pentecost. What a surprising message of grace!

How has God surprised you, in your life? Or in your congregation's life? Where have you seen grace at work? Sometimes we feel that we have to do everything ourselves - until we notice how much God is doing quietly on the sides. Have you ever experienced that? This is a great Sunday to testify to how you've seen Christ alive and at work in the world!

It's also a great Sunday to talk about how God can breathe new life into our religious practices, and transform how we see people around us. How is the Holy Spirit opening your eyes and hearts to the people around you?

*After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, dedications and sacrifices could no longer be made, so the meaning of Shavuot gradually changed. Today, Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah (the Law) at Mount Sinai, and remains one of the most important festivals in Jewish practice.

June 16, 2019 – Trinity Sunday

John 16:12-15

Today we celebrate Trinity Sunday, one of the most theologically challenging festivals of the year. It's a festival that asks us, "what difference does the doctrine of the Trinity make in my life, and in the life of my congregation?", and very few of us have a ready answer.

Canadian small church researcher, Cameron Harder, has a great answer to this question. In his book, *Discovering the Other*, Harder roots his dream of what small churches can be, if we only look at them the right way, in an overarching theology of the Trinity. It's a short section of his book, a few pages, and I've scanned it here: *What is God Really Up To?* The rest of his book is equally inspiring and encouraging for small churches! (It's available on Amazon and Chapters).

Harder gives us a great example of what happens when we allow the doctrine of the Trinity to shape our understanding. When we place God, and God's activity first, and ask what we should do in response, God's identity as Trinity, as community make an enormous difference. Taking Cameron Harder's lead, what difference might this make in your congregation?

The Gospel selected for today is a passage from Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples during the Last Supper. One phrase that stuck out at me as particularly poignant for Trinity Sunday is the opening line in our Gospel: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." How many generations of Christians have wondered when we would get to hear the things Jesus is referring to? Are these things the disciples were finally able to "bear" once Jesus had been crucified and resurrected? Or are these things unbearable until a time after that? Perhaps until after our own deaths and resurrections to eternal life?

Throughout the Gospels it is clear that Jesus has knowledge that the disciples can't grasp. Oftentimes he tries, but they don't understand. (Witness Jesus saying, in the 10th chapter of Mark, "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first," (Mk 10:31), and then predicting his crucifixion and death, and James and John the sons of Zebedee following this up immediately by asking Jesus if they can sit beside him when he takes the throne in Jerusalem. Ohhh boy.) Other times, Jesus simply smiles mysteriously and lets them be confused (like Nicodemus in John 3), or leaves them to puzzle it out on their own. Not infrequently, he is frustrated by their inability to understand what he's talking about (like in Matthew 13, where the disciples basically

need a step-by-step explanation of each of the parables Jesus tells). But here, Jesus explicitly acknowledges he's withholding knowledge from them until such time as they can actually understand him.

Jesus is one with God; Jesus' heart is God's heart; Jesus' knowledge is God's knowledge. How many things must Jesus know that are beyond our ability to understand? (Psalm 139:17: "how many are your thoughts, O God; how vast is the sum of them!")

What do we do when we're confronted with something that is beyond our knowing? There is a promise implied in what Jesus says here, repeated all over Scripture: that now we know only in part, but the day will come when we know fully, even as we ourselves are fully known (1 Cor 13:12). That is a very beautiful promise.

Can you think of a time in your life when you have known that there are things you don't know? Can you tell a story about that time? How long did that time last? What did you feel about knowing that you didn't know? What could that experience say about following Jesus during this time of not-yet-knowing? Some people will find this an anxious concept - what is the hope and grace that Jesus offers us in the in-between time?

June 23, 2019 – Pentecost 2

Luke 8:26-39

There are moments in the Church Year when we have some strange segues - like for instance, here, where we transition from the “Jesus departing and sending the Holy Spirit” narrative to “Jesus at the beginning of his ministry” narrative. We who have been around in the Church a long time just roll with these unexpected jumps; but they sure must be confusing for folks who are newer to the liturgical tradition!

Today’s jump isn’t actually all that surprising though, when we look at it more deeply. The Season after Pentecost (or Ordinary Time) takes up more than half of the Church Year. We have the festival season, Advent through to Pentecost, which is the story of how God acts. The other half of the year, the season after Pentecost, is all about how we respond (while continuing to be about how God acts, since God is never absent in our proceedings!).

After Jesus’ ascension, the disciples prayed for God to show them what ministry they were to undertake. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit introduced them to the people outside their doors - all of whom were faithful Jews in Jerusalem for the festival of Shavuot (see above). But the story of Christ’s saving work doesn’t end with the Jews, as we know. It extends to the Gentiles as well. So, here we are, taking a retrospective look at the mission to the Gentiles that Jesus himself undertook during his earthly ministry.

Just a quick note before we go on: in the ancient Jewish thought world, all people were divided into two categories: Jews (the chosen people of God), and Gentiles (everyone else, who worshipped other gods). So the ministry to the Gentiles wasn’t a ministry to a particular people, it was a ministry of blowing apart a long-standing us/them paradigm. As Paul says in our Epistle today, “now there is no longer Jew nor Greek (Gentile), there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female - for all of you are one in Christ Jesus!” Many scholars have noted that in the Gospels, it’s non-Jews who understand Jesus’ ministry and identity much more clearly than the Jews do (including Jesus’ own disciples).

Today’s passage is set in a Gentile territory on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Here, the moment Jesus set foot out of the boat, he met a Gentile man possessed with demons, whose demons recognized Jesus immediately, and gave him his true title: “Son of the Most High God” - one it would take the disciples much more time to see and understand.

In the famous book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, Catholic Missionary Vincent Donovan writes about heading off into East Africa in the 1960s, full of conviction, to bring Christianity to the Maasai tribe. Expecting to take Christ with him to these non-Christians, he instead discovered Christ powerfully present and already at work deep in the hearts and lives of the people. Just as much as he evangelized them, his experience of learning to love them re-evangelized him.

The same challenge that Jesus posed to his disciples (see, look: these are your brothers and sisters too!), is the same challenge the Holy Spirit posed to Peter and the early Church (are you willing to eat with Gentiles, and acknowledge the Spirit falling upon them? Acts 11:1-3, 17-18). It is this same challenge that God poses to us today: are we willing and able to see God alive and at work in the hearts of people where we least expect it? This is the rest of the story, from the day of Pentecost onward. It is the rest of the story of the Church, as it expanded outward in ripples from Jerusalem. They went out to evangelize, and they discovered God, going always ahead of them, opening the hearts of the people.

How do we look for God at work in the world around us? How does God call us to go outward? How does God meet us when we do? Just as we are called to evangelize, how are we also invited to be re-evangelized ourselves by relating to those who supposedly know less about God than we do?

June 30, 2019 – Pentecost 3

Luke 9:51-62

Last week's Gospel reading took us ahead into the Mission to the Gentiles by recalling Jesus' own mission to the Gentiles. Last week, the message was that God may be already at work in their midst. This week, we confront the question, what happens when we encounter people who are closed to this ministry? What happens when the mission doesn't go so well? James and John have a great answer: call down fire upon them! But Jesus has a different answer: simply carry on. His face is set towards Jerusalem; this Samaritan (Gentile) village refuses to receive him because his face is set towards Jerusalem - and in response, Jesus merely carries on. He turns neither to the left nor to the right, but keeps his face set towards Jerusalem.

Then we hear of people who seem to be open to the ministry - they want to follow, but Jesus answers their various requests with a "no" in each case. We have to assume that there's an internal process of discernment going on here that we don't see. His face is set towards Jerusalem, and these willing followers think they're getting involved in something different. Nonetheless, Jesus perseveres, and lets them go their own way.

The Epistles of the New Testament, and the Acts of the Apostles record for all history the many challenges and disappointments that the apostles faced as they grew the Church. We like to focus on the uplifting parts, or the bracing parts, but there are lots of details in there of the difficult parts - times when it must have been mighty difficult to persevere and hold the course. I bet there were times when they'd have liked to call down fire, like James and John proposed! For a taste of the many challenges, and turn-arounds and attempts they had to make, give a close read to Acts 16. It was far from a straight-forward journey.

So how do we persevere when we face challenges in the Church? How do we "set our face to Jerusalem" and hold the course? How do we know who and what to say yes to, and who and what to say no to? And how do we respond to those who stand in our way, or who don't wish to come along? For challenges will surely come to us at some point, my brothers and sisters. If the lives of the apostles tells us anything it's that challenges and hardships come even to those who are following the will of God most closely, and who are blessed by the Holy Spirit most powerfully.

However you answer these questions, may God bless you in your ministry, and bless your congregations abundantly, to persevere through the challenges that come. Amen.