Sunday 24th April 2022

Acts 5: 27-32 and Revelation 1: 4-8 – Who to please?

First reading we join the apostles, including Peter, a little while after the resurrection events of Easter. Jesus had appeared to the disciples and other followers. They were assured of His resurrection.

Not a ghost without substance, but fully resurrected – to the point of sharing food with them and Thomas being able to touch Him and feel His wounds.

With that assurance they were able to continue in the work of Jesus, bringing His kingdom to earth by telling people the truth of Him, and with signs of healing, wisdom and prophecy.

Such trust and belief enabled them to withstand the earthly powers used to try to stop them, jail, persecution and even death.

The apostles continued to tell the truth – which was not appreciated by all, especially the Pharisees, the religious leaders. They had wanted Jesus to be eradicated when He was crucified – a myth that just fizzled out.

But not only were the followers continuing to talk about Jesus, but they were accused of being “determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood”. They took the actions to stir up the crowd and put Pilate in a position where to keep the peace crucifixion was the only possible outcome – but they did not want to live with the consequences of their actions.

I ponder at times, did Jesus appear to any of the Pharisees? The bible does not tell us every person He met with after His resurrection and whether they all believed. Surely it was not only Thomas who doubted?

Enough of my pondering – the response of the apostles was “We must obey God rather than men”. When they use the phrase “rather than men” it also includes themselves, surely. If they obeyed their own emotions and fear of outcomes then they would surely not follow into pain and even possible death.

They also incite the Holy Spirit as a witness to Jesus, a God given gift to those who obey Him. Another form of stressing that the Pharisees were not obeying God. Despite the growing evidence of what had happened they were too comfortable with the power that they had, keeping order and being left alone by the Romans. Is this an example of obeying men, putting their comfort before God?

We then turn to Revelation – written about 50 years or so after the Easter events.

Revelation – a difficult book to interpret with many views on how to do so. Is it simply showing futuristic happenings? But then, where would be the relevance for those early Christians to whom it was written?

Let us put ourselves into their position for a moment. Consider the circumstances.

The gospel had been preached throughout the Roman province of Asia, amongst other places. Some had believed and become Christians. They had been taught that Jesus was the Son of God.

Being divine He was fully in control of all situations. Rejected by the Jews, crucified, but that was the way in which He brought salvation to all people. Having died, He had risen to eternal life. He had returned to heaven but promised that He would return. He would destroy the kingdoms of this world and set up God’s perfect kingdom.

It was an inspiring faith and the small group of Christians embraced it with fervour. They longed for the promised return and God’s perfect will to sweep through the whole of earth.

Nothing happened.

The church probably slowed in its growth; it did not suddenly become a mighty force to take over the Roman empire. In fact, the Empire continued in its wicked ways. Oppression and injustice continued. Evil men and women prospered. Idol worship continued.

Christians who clung to the truth were treated with suspicion and persecuted. Jail and death continued.

Belief that God was active in it all demanded an extremely strong faith. Surely doubt must have crept in, had they been mistaken? Was it a delusion? Did some envisage this pretty ideal, but it was shattered on the hard rocks of social and political realities? Was real power still in the hands of the emperor?

It was to this church that Revelation was given, a church perplexed by problems. They would not have appreciated a letter that was in fact an intellectual puzzle that required plenty of time and inclination to solve mysteries and symbols.

No, it was sent to a small, persecuted and frustrated church that did not know what to make of the situation it found itself in. John was writing to meet the need of that church. How different is it from our church today?

The visions that John reports emphasize over and over, amongst the symbols, that the future belongs to Christ. John expects to see Christ the Lion, but instead sees the lamb that has been slain. The appearances may be in contradiction to what is expected, but the ultimate reality is not dependent on present appearances.

Throughout the book we see that God is supreme and despite opposition to His power, God is never thwarted – He is supreme and His purpose will come to pass.

Isn’t that just as relevant for us today, as it was all that time ago? The oppressors of earth may have changed, but God’s power remains supreme.

One of the first greetings “who is, and who was, and who is to come” – this emphasizes an unchanging and eternal God.

When we read the word “7”, such as the seven spirits, the number 7 represents perfection. It points to the Holy Spirit – not a term used by John, but no less recognized as being real and present.

We are then told that Jesus was present – the divine trinity together. It re-iterates that Jesus is not a defeated leader, but is a King, full of Majesty. He was the first born from the dead, and it was through His bloodshed that we are freed from our sins. This is not a future freedom, but a freedom available right now.

Likewise, it is through His redeeming resurrection that we are a kingdom and priests. Not a future appointment – but present in us right now.

We are a kingdom – we have through the Holy Spirit the requisite desires and ability to bring justice within us now. We are not kings, but we are a kingdom, not a land with known boundaries – but able to live to do God’s service and bring His kingdom to wherever we are.

We are also priests. Priests are mediators between God and His people. Yes, we bring the needs of people to God, through prayer, with Jesus, but a priest also speaks God’s word to people. Priests were also responsible for bringing sacrifice – so our life should be a sacrifice to God for this world and to bring His kingdom.

John then reports of Jesus coming again, and every eye shall see Him, even those who pierced Him. This again emphasizes the supremacy of God, that Jesus will come again, His kingdom shall come in perfect fullness in His time, and that every person and power will come into His presence.

God then speaks “I am the Alpha and the Omega” – no-one was before Him and no-one will survive Him. A reflection of His sovereignty, His eternity in the phrase “who is, who was and who is to come” and finally His all-embracing power over all when He says “the Almighty!”.

As we receive this encouragement of the lasting character of God, we should be encouraged to live like the apostles in Acts.

Let our faith be renewed and our trust strengthened. Let our fervour for Jesus be refreshed so that we, like Peter and the apostles do not succumb to what people want us to do, to be quiet and allow Jesus to just fizzle out like a myth - but rather that we obey God, to bring His kingdom to earth through our lives. To treat people with respect and love, to be priests and mediate on their behalf with God and be prepared to speak God given words to them.

The apostles did not shy from praying with people and speaking healing in His name. These were not exceptional events but every day occurrences for them. Yes, miracles are reported in the bible, but equally so is the persecution and rejection that it brought to them.

We may never suffer the same persecution or be brought before the Pharisees like Peter and the apostles – but we will all be brought before the divine trinity.

We all have different gifts and callings and we should never judge each other by what we each do. But as you continue leading the life that God has given you, be encouraged to be His kingdom, present on earth now. Be a sacrificial priest so others may be redeemed by His precious blood that was shed equally for those who do not know Him yet as for us. Let our fervour, faith and trust be renewed, strengthened and re-ignited.