

Reflection for the Seventh Sunday of Easter



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Acts 1.6-14

The Greek fable of Pandora's box ends with an empty box in which one tiny thing remains - hope - although this word could be translated as "deceptive expectation". We live with hopes – some realistic, some beyond dreaming. Sometimes it is easier to keep hoping than to accept reality.

Jews of Jesus' time longed to see the fulfilment of biblical prophecy that Israel would be free (of the Romans) and the kingdom restored. Conflated with hope for the kingdom was the unsaid, but real hope of personal power and authority of "running their own show". Some of Jesus teaching was interpreted as referring to this. In the days following Jesus' resurrection there are two instances where Jesus' disciples give voice to unfulfilled hopes.

When Jesus joins two downcast followers on the Emmaus Road, they describe a shattered hope – "that he would be the one who was going to set Israel free" (Luke 24: 21). Secondly, moments before the Ascension they ask Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Hope does not always give up – after the disappointment of the crucifixion they are at it again, looking for the moment when Israel will be free. This is so true of human nature.

The repeated hope for a new Kingdom of Israel betrays the disciples' inability to comprehend Jesus' teaching. A case of hope and keep hoping, even when hope is inconsistent with reality. Jesus replies, telling them the "when" is not for them to know. He follows this not with a gift of earthly power or an earthly kingdom of Israel, but a commission and a new job – to be his witnesses, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Luke, the author of Acts, through this story tells that while Jesus has ascended to the Father, the work of disciples is being witnesses on earth. The Kingdom, for which they hoped (erroneously), and of which Jesus spoke, was actually an earthly paradigm in which the will and the ways of God would prevail over the whole human condition of life. The two men in white robes rebuked the disciples as they looked heavenwards: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?" The work of witnessing to Jesus would be sustained by community, fellowship and unceasing prayer, to which the disciples returned after leaving the mountain.

Had we been with the disciples that day, would we have been looking anywhere else but to heaven as Jesus ascended into the cloud? Somehow I doubt it. But being witnesses to Jesus, his death and resurrection, are tasks we have received from Jesus. It means witnessing to a new world order of justice and grace, which many church agencies such as Anglicare, Anglican Board of Missions and Christian organisations beyond our church do so well. It means maintaining an informed critique of actions of all governments and being ready to speak, or use whatever influence is open to us, to bring light and question to bear on actions which are an impediment to the Kingdom of God.

Witnessing for Jesus is a way of bringing hope to situations crying out for resurrection and new beginning. Hope has been described as "deceptive expectation". When we are armed with the power of the Holy Spirit, the hope we bear as Christians is much more than that. Amen.