

## Sermon 1 June 2025 Carrying out Jesus' work

### Colossians 3:23-25 John 17:20-26

Before we have a look at our gospel reading, I want to refer to Ascension Day, which we acknowledged in our Christian calendar last Thursday. I quote from Luke 24:50-51: *'Then Jesus led his disciples to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven.'* So Jesus ascends to heaven.

Many years ago, Richard Bach wrote a best-selling book called 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull.' It was a fairy tale about a young seagull's growth from childhood to adulthood. At a critical point in the story, two beautiful white seagulls appear and tell Jonathan that it is time for him to take an important step in his life. Jonathan hesitates, but the two birds insist, saying to him, 'One school has finished, and the time has come for another to begin.'

Jonathan suddenly realises that it is indeed time for him to leave the familiar beach that he has become accustomed to as a young seagull and to soar up into the sky, beyond the white clouds. He takes one last look at the beach, and then with the two birds at his side, he soars into the blue sky and disappears into the clouds.

Richard Bach, who wrote the book, probably didn't intend it, but there is a striking resemblance between this dramatic episode in his book and the dramatic episode in Jesus' life, his ascension to heaven. Young Jonathan resembles Jesus. He had finished one phase of his life and had to begin another. Likewise, Jesus had finished one phase of his life and had to begin another. Likewise, Jonathan's rising up into the clouds resembles Jesus rising up into the clouds.

Jesus' departure is not the end of his work on earth. It is simply the end of the first phase of it, the phase he carried out in a physical body. Now begins the second phase that he will carry out in a spiritual body. The time for inaugurating God's kingdom on earth is over. The time for spreading God's kingdom across the earth is about to begin. And this where the account of the ascension leads into the message contained in today's gospel reading.

This gospel passage brings to an end Jesus' final discourse to his disciples. I want to focus on two points from this passage. Firstly, Jesus talks about unity: *'I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one.'* John 17:21. Unity, or rather a lack of unity, is an issue for our Christian church. All too often there is division around race, belief and even politics. All too often, this has led to people leaving a particular church, and even churches closing down. So very sad. If our church is to grow, and by 'our church' I mean both our immediate church and the wider church, we have to reach out across boundaries of race, culture and belief. In the words of Jesus, we need to become 'completely one.'

I repeat what I have said on more than one occasion, Jesus said 'love your neighbour.' He did not qualify that command. He did not say, 'Love your neighbour, as long as he/she looks like you, thinks like you, behaves like you.' No way! Unfortunately, for many people looking in from the outside of our Christian church, this is the impression they have. We need to try and to do our little bit to change that impression. This is precisely why we have suggested the slogan 'Open to all' for our community centre. The principles as stated in our vision include inclusiveness, kindness and diversity. That is precisely what Jesus means by 'completely one.' Or as Paul says in our first reading, *'Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.'* Romans 15:7.

The second point I want to highlight is that this passage concludes Jesus' charge to his disciple to continue his ministry. I have often made the point that we are all, in effect disciples of Jesus, and Jesus actually affirms this at the beginning of our gospel reading: *'I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me.'* John 17:20. So we are also charged to carry out his ministry, albeit in our own small way.

There is the story of the great Italian composer, Giacomo Puccini, who wrote a number of famous operas, including 'Madame Butterfly' and 'La Boheme.' In 1922 the 64-year-old Puccini was stricken with cancer. In spite of this disease, Puccini was determined to finish his final opera, 'Turandot', which many now consider to be his best.

He worked on it day and night. When his sickness worsened, Puccini said to his disciples, 'If I don't finish, I want you to finish this opera for me.' Then came the fateful day in 1924. He died. His disciples gathered together the scores from 'Turandot', studied them and then completed his opera.

In 1926 the opera premiered and was conducted by Puccini's favourite student, Arturo Toscanini. Everything went beautifully until the opera reached the point where Puccini was forced to put down his pen. Tears ran down Toscanini's face. He stopped the music, put down his baton, turned to the audience and cried out, 'This far the master wrote, but he died.'

There was silence throughout the opera house. No one moved. Then Toscanini picked up the baton again, smiled through his tears and said, 'But his disciples finished his work.' When Turandot ended, the audience rose to their feet and broke into thunderous applause. No one there ever forgot that moment.

On the day of his ascension two thousand years ago, Jesus passed his baton on to his disciples. As his disciples, we inherit that charge. His work has to be carried out, from generation to generation. Creating God's kingdom is rather like creating a symphony. Everything needs to work in harmony. If different movements, parts of an opera are disjointed, then the opera won't work, it will not have any impact. In the same way, if the church is to have an impact, we must be one. We must work together, and we must all play our part. You and I share this responsibility. Each one of us must decide how we can best carry out our part in this responsibility.

I repeat the story told by Anthony de Mello in his book, 'The Song of the Bird.' 'On the street, I saw a small girl cold and shivering in a thin dress, with little hope of a decent meal. I became angry and said to God, "Why did you permit this? Why haven't you done something about this?" For a while God said nothing. That night he replied quite suddenly, "I certainly did something. I made you."'

I finish with a quote on discipleship by American philosopher, Dallas Willard, *'Discipleship is the process of becoming who Jesus would be if he were you.'* Now there is a challenge for us all.