

## Some words for the Seventh Sunday of Easter

*'Graciously hear our supplications, O Lord, so that we, who believe that the Saviour of the human race is with you in your glory, may experience, as he promised, until the end of the world, his abiding presence among us.'*<sup>1</sup>



### Readings:

*Acts 1:12-14*

*Psalm 26:1. 4. 7-8. R.v.13*

*1 Peter 4:13-16*

*John 17:1-11*

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

What is greatness? It is often a matter for heated debate, especially within the world of sports, and in the absence of live sport such discussion has helped fill many an empty television and radio schedule these past few weeks. The prestigious *Wisden Cricketer's Almanac* named the Australian leg-spin bowler Shane Warne, one of the five greatest cricketers of the twentieth century. I was fortunate to watch him live, playing for Australia against England in the Ashes. He was without doubt a great player. However, it was another player who made that same list, who I once saw play in a more personal and intimate setting away from the international arena, whom I consider the greatest cricketer I have yet seen. The location was the Abbeydale Ground, here in Sheffield, the match was Yorkshire versus Somerset in the County Championship, and the cricketer was the regally named West Indian batsman, Isaac Vivian Alexander Richards – known universally as Viv.

I can still recall, well over thirty years on, that sauntering swagger to the crease of this cricketing prince and the hushed, almost reverent atmosphere his appearance

occasioned among the crowd. Many bowlers subsequently spoke of their difficulty in bowling to Richards. His sheer physical presence, his aura if you will, intimidated them and it soon became clear that day that he was 'in the mood' as he nonchalantly notched up a score of over 150. Internationally recognised for their knowledge, Yorkshire's crowds have also been known to be less than kind when welcoming their opponent, even if he wasn't a Lancastrian. This though was different. We all knew we were in the presence of greatness and we wanted to see him perform. We sensed our privilege.

Today's gospel, which has Jesus beginning what is known as his *Priestly Prayer*, will see the Lord, prepare to offer himself as a sacrifice for sin and, like a High Priest of old, intercede for his people. The privileged disciples are invited into the very heart of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Witnesses to unsurpassed greatness, the Son of God made flesh, what did the disciples make of it all I wonder?

We very likely bow our head and close our eyes when attempting to enter into a deep sense of prayerfulness yet, in adopting a posture whereby, '*he raised his eyes to heaven,*'<sup>2</sup> Jesus was merely following the convention of his time. The *Great Prayer*, as it is also known, is focused on the heavens, the dwelling place of the Father, and even now we still speak of '*prayer as the raising of one's mind and heart to God.*'<sup>3</sup> So it is then that Jesus is not concentrated on himself but rather the will of the Father and the destiny of his disciples. This glimpse into the relationship of the Father and the Son has been likened to the great prayers of Abraham<sup>4</sup> or Moses<sup>5</sup>, while others see it as John's '*Our Father,*' the pattern of all Christian prayer. A rich, concentrated distillation of the nature and heart of our Saviour; the prayer will range over the relationship of Jesus with his Father and with his Church and it will speak of deep and abiding love. What we say, and how we say it, matters a great deal. Opening his heart, the Lord Jesus will speak of many things, but today I want to briefly touch on where he begins – his glory.

At the very beginning of the gospel St John will write, '*The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.*'<sup>6</sup> The Greek word *Doxa*, which we usually translate as *Glory* occurs in both the Old and New Testament. In Hebrew usage it referred to the 'weight' or 'heft' of something and the concept could, as we still do, be applied to a person also. We can indicate the importance or power of someone by speaking of them having gravitas for example, or of being a political heavyweight or a weighty presence on the bench or in midfield. When used of God then these qualities are understood to be all the greater. So dazzling is God that he cannot be looked upon by us<sup>7</sup> and

therefore in the New Testament, Jesus, the glory of God seen in flesh, is understood to be the glory of God in all his fullness.

In speaking of *'the hour [that] has come,'*<sup>8</sup> Jesus alludes to his forthcoming glory on the Cross; the site where weakness and foolishness will triumph,<sup>9</sup> and the royal banner of victory be raised aloft, *'And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself.'*<sup>10</sup> He then immediately prays, *'Father ... glorify your Son so that you your Son may glorify you.'*<sup>11</sup> The Lord here is not grandstanding, preening and priding himself before the disciples, selfishly asking for greatness; he is asking for the opposite. Jesus prays that he might be completely selfless. Just as the Father has given everything to the Son, the Son wishes to give everything back to the Father. For *'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life.'*<sup>12</sup> What we discern is the inner life of God, a complete exchange of love.

*'I have glorified you on earth and finished the work that you gave me to do,'*<sup>13</sup> Jesus tells the Father. From the time of his birth it has been the desire and intention of the Son to glorify his Father. Each and every day, from childhood to adulthood, all through the hidden years to the time of his public ministry, his words and deeds have been dedicated to this purpose. The Cross is the consummation of all that has gone before, not a final moment that stands apart from the rest. Somehow comprehending, in his humanity, his unique relationship with the Father, he asks of him, *'it is time for you to glorify me with that glory I had with you before ever the world was.'*<sup>14</sup> Again, this is not an assertion of primacy or independence; it is a desire to enjoy a shared glory, the mutual fruit of being once again together.

Finally, we discover that the glory of Christ, won by obedience on the Cross, is available to us also for, between the Father and the Son, *'all I have is yours and all you have is mine, and in them [the disciples] I am glorified.'*<sup>15</sup> Beginning with the disciples, not at first glance the most promising of material, we, the members of his Body, are nonetheless taken up and incorporated into the light and life of God. The history of the Church, littered with examples where the glory of God has all but disappeared, rendered invisible by having been buried beneath sin and pride, greed and folly, shows nonetheless the enduring face of the Lord.

Human acts and intentions are often messy and misunderstood and divine ones can appear puzzling and opaque at the best of times. I have often pondered how the miracles of Jesus, those incredible moments of glory, must have been ambiguous; that they occurred in such a form that they did not overpower a person's free will.

Whatever you saw, whether it was the feeding of the five thousand or the resuscitation of the dead such as Lazarus, you were still somehow free to walk away from it all and many of course did. However extraordinary and miraculous, you were left with a choice. What would I have made of Jesus in the flesh I ask myself? Would I have sensed and seen greatness or simply suspected a clever conman who clearly possessed some great tricks? Alas, I will never know. The historical Jesus, so much a part of my imagination, no longer exists in the flesh as I know it. His Passover accomplished on earth, he is glorified, ascended flesh now and seated at the right-hand side of the Father. Yet the Christ of the Gospels is not dead. Yes, he is different, but he is decidedly the same also. He still comes to me and, more importantly, he comes to others too. Thank God.

The self-assurance of Viv Richards at the crease was justified by his sporting greatness - he really was that special – and the ability to recognise greatness in a particular field is one of the simple joys of sport. Christian greatness is very different and, at first glance, can be much harder to spot. It is not the way of the humble to boast and, should others then decide to give praise to God in heaven, then that for the humble Christian is even better. On this occasion at least, I am more than aware of the plank in my own eye rather than the splinter in my brother's. I don't look in a mirror and immediately behold the glory of God, but I can look upon my brothers and sisters in Christ and, in their example, far more readily see his greatness and his glory. As we will affirm next week at the feast of Pentecost, we are his presence now; his light of glory to the world.

*'For the glory of God is the living man, and the life of man is the vision of God.  
If the revelation of God by the creation already gives life to all the beings living on earth,  
how much more does the manifestation of the Father by the Word  
give life to those who see God!'*<sup>16</sup>

Our Lady of Walsingham, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

24 May 2020

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The picture is of *La Prière Sacerdotale*, (The Priestly Prayer), Eugène Burnand, 1850-1921.

1. *Collect, Proper for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Roman Missal*
2. *John 17:1*
3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church, ccc. 2559*
4. *Genesis 18:16-33*
5. *Exodus 32:9-14*
6. *John 1:14*
7. *Exodus 33:17-23*
8. *John 17:1*
9. *1 Corinthians 1:18, 23-25*
10. *John 12:32*
11. *John 17:1*
12. *John 3:16*
13. *John 17:4*
14. *John 17:5*
15. *John 17:10*
16. *Against Heresies, St Irenaeus of Lyons, tr. Robert M. Grant*