

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A 2023

Admission to Holy Communion and the Blessing of the Pledges

Sunday readings referenced are Acts 17.22-31; 1 Peter 3.13-22

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Lord, may the words I speak, build up and not tear down so that your name may be praised in all the world. **Amen.**

This is a very special day at Christ Church. Amber, Thomas, Spencer, Anna and Julia will be admitted to Holy Communion. All of them were baptised at Christ Church. All attend Kids Church. Each has a story to tell. Amber has been through a serious and prolonged illness most of it during the pandemic restricting visits etc. Spencer's brother Sidney was baptised at Christ Church on the last Sunday before the churches in Austria closed their doors in accordance with the request of the government at the time. These five children are the first to be admitted to Holy Communion at Christ Church since before the pandemic. It is wonderful that their parents - given the demands of modern life - have encouraged and supported them up to this moment in their Christian lives thereby making real their intention to draw their children by their example into the community of faith, as they walk with them in the way of faith. Let us note that Sasha has asked to be baptised. And we look forward to his baptism.

This is a special day at Christ Church not only because Julia, Anna, Spencer, Thomas and Amber are being admitted to receive Holy Communion, another step in belonging, in belonging to the living church, which is Christ's body in which we dwell/abide, but also because today marks the end of our stewardship campaign to encourage a commitment

of time, talent and treasure (money) to God's church and its local expression Christ Church, which should never be an 'also-ran'. Stewardship is to be a means by which we order our lives according to the will of God, so that in our hearts we may and will sanctify Christ as Lord. Today children are admitted to Holy Communion and pledges are blessed, because of the gift of life, the gift of faith and the gift of abiding in God. In God our present, our tomorrow and our end, which is no end, is secure.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. In a few weeks' Yigit will be baptised as an adult and confirmed. Elena, Michael, Leah and Josh will be confirmed. Markus and Ada and God willing one other, the masked candidate, paralleling the TV show the Masked Singer, will be received. The service will take place the day after the Street Party and less than a fortnight after the Long Night of the Churches in which we are also participating. On the day we will be joined by candidates from Brno, Czech Republic and Budapest, Hungary. And finally at the end of June Grace will present Malkia for baptism. We have much to be grateful for as the people of God in this place. The ministry of this church stretches back to before the church was built. For a church to be built there needs first to be a community.

Time permitting I would have loved to take you on an extensive tour of the church, as there are a number of clues as to how this church has indwelt time since its conception, memorialised first by the stone plaque at the back of the church, next by the 1948 grand stained glass window that thrones over our church with the coat of arms of George VI, King Charles III's grandfather, and then by the whitewashing of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer in an act of vandalism in the 70s by an incumbent taken hold of and trapped by the Zeitgeist, the spirit of the age, which should serve us a warning. Spare us good Lord from the confusions of this present age by your Holy Spirit, who is for ever leading us into the truth of God made known in Jesus Christ.

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles is a much-loved reading by Christian philosophers. It however echoes other passages in the Acts. Let me share just one with you. Paul and Barnabas, whose feast day we will keep on Sunday 10 June, find themselves in Lystra having had to flee Iconium for fear of being stoned. In Lystra Barnabas will be called Zeus and Paul will be called Hermes, as he is the spokesman, the messenger because the inhabitants of Lystra believe that Paul and Barnabas are gods, who have come down from heaven having healed a man born lame. Believing this to be the case the priest of the Temple comes to the city gate with an ox decked in garlands, prepared for sacrifice.

Paul says on that occasion,

'Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things (the worthless things are images, trinkets, spells, custom and sacrifices made to Greek gods) to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.' Acts 14:14-15

Given today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles I want to take you with me to the Areopagus in Athens, which I visited first as member of the archdeaconry synod – Philip and Hyacinth were also members at the time – later as archdeacon of the East, but most recently with a group from Christ Church in 2022. It was on that last occasion that I grasped the immensity of how Christianity spread against all the odds and took hold. Scales dropped from my eyes. I was moved to sanctify Christ as Lord in my heart.

Looking up from the Areopagus you see the Acropolis (Ares' Hill, Ares being the god of war and battle). There stands the Temple dedicated to Zeus, which is forever being restored and looking down from the areopagus, you look on the agora. The agora, the

market place, where in the Greek world life was lived publicly. On the axis of Temple on the Acropolis (the high city) and the agora (the marketplace) lies the Areopagus.

The Areopagus is an unimpressive stone hill. Sorry! Given its significance, it is disappointing. The significance of the Areopagus is twofold: *one* it is given by Paul's readiness to make an argument for the God of our Lord Jesus Christ amongst the learned, and *two* by its location between Temple and marketplace, the sacred and the secular. Paul's willingness, his readiness, in his words his foolishness to tell the world that Christ is Lord. Realising the significance of location, you understand Paul's words about *our* location: For it is in him, Jesus, that we "live and move and have our being".

As I think of the location of the Areopagus between Temple and marketplace (agora), where Paul preached Christ crucified, risen and ascended, I am reminded of the words from Paul's letter to the Colossians which the Prime Minister read at the Coronation, thereby pledging himself implicitly to upholding the Christian heritage of the United Kingdom,

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. (Colossians 1:15-21)

May Christ have first place in the children being admitted to Holy Communion, those now preparing for baptism, confirmation and reception, and in each one of us as we pledge ourselves anew to God.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. **Amen.**