
Hymns: 88 **“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”**
 155 **“Come Holy Ghost”**
 459 **“Captain of Israel’s Host and Guide”**
 459 **“Lord for the years”**

Readings: **Acts 1. 15-17, 21-26**
 John 17. 6-19

“COME DINE WITH ME”

Prayer

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN.

With Big brother past its sell by date on television, and strictly come dancing and its ilk out of season, the viewing public has to get its daily fix of reality fly-on-the-wall with ‘come dine with me.’ It plays every afternoon (I’ve heard) - at just about the time I might get home and be turning around before an evening meeting.... but I miss Big brother for theological reflection!

Today on this Sunday after Ascension, when the disciples have seen Jesus rise into the air – read Acts 1 from verse 6, our reading has them returned to Jerusalem to get on with the business of life. We are right at the very end of the Easter season, looking forward towards Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit next week.

But today, Peter (never one to let silence last long) chirps up with the first order of business, which is to replace Judas Iscariot among the 12 disciples. And we hear how they go about it – these men and women who are living on in normal life, having said goodbye to the post-resurrection Jesus.

I want to share three small observations about the fly on the wall genre of reality tv - and the early church, and then close with some more constructive eavesdropping on the prayer Jesus offers for the church in our Gospel reading. Because what we heard was Jesus on the last night of his life, praying for the protection of his people.

First, reality TV and the early church: Big brother back in the day was a tv series where a bunch of strangers were put together in a house, taken out of the world, then given special tasks and challenges.

Each week, they nominated some of their own number to get kicked out, and then TV audiences vote (at a price) to confirm or reject their nominations. The last one, the one at the heart of the community will be left alone, having killed off all his or her rivals: they will get money, and fame: magazine and newspaper deals, and maybe their own diet show – who knows.

Meanwhile, cameras and mikes tucked all through their house, bedrooms and bathrooms included, record their lives and the way they get on with each other. And millions of us watched: we see them preen in front of the mirror, negotiate who will do the dishes, make and break acquaintances and alliances. Not many of us remember that the name 'Big Brother' as a phrase is the name of the horrific, threatening power in George Orwell's book about a fascist future: 1984.

In *Come dine with me*, which is still running, four strangers agree to cook and serve each other dinner in their homes on consecutive days for a week: they give each other menus in advance, turn up on each other's doorsteps, and share a meal – they also poke around each others' bedrooms and bathrooms – the viewer is helped in making reactions by the voice of a snide invisible commentator, sort of an bad angel sitting on the shoulder as if next to us on the settee, encouraging us to derisive reactions... at the end of the evening, in the taxi on the way home each guest has to give the host marks out of ten for hospitality. At the end of the week, the one with the most hospitality points wins – 1000 pounds cash.

In both, the group seems to have been selected so as to provoke conflict, a collection of people who wouldn't necessarily know, let alone get on with each other in the life of the world. *Big Brother*, *come dine with me*.

Here is my first observation: the diversity of reality show contestants, forced together to sort out ordinary life and 'do 'hospitality,' is not unlike the diversity of early church of Scripture, before we settled down into the supposedly easier project of worship and witness with people who are mainly 'just like us.'

Hear me out – you get An extravagantly stylized gay man, another with Tourette's syndrome, women with fake breasts, or small breasts, 'lager lads', plain ones, pretty ones. Even the odd washed up politician.

Fishermen, doctors, Roman citizens, WOMEN, lepers, harlots, gentiles! They are taken out of the world and protected from it – put together for a social experiment. And we who look from outside on their doings, we eavesdrop, we overhear, we witness, much as we read the accounts of the early church communities in Acts. There is no way these people are going to get along, it seems. And we certainly have not gotten along. So is the life of the church, then, just God's own come big brother experiment re-told in Scripture and in our history? Don't worry, there are a few differences....

As we watch the programmes on tv, and read the Acts of the Apostles, are we hoping to find out these people in both are actually 'just like us,' full of vanity, lust, petty jealousy and fears, far less tidy than the pictures we present to each other out in the big wide world of our streets and shops, churches and workplaces? The comedy, or at least entertainment is meant to come from how horrible they are, and the parody of real hospitality they make. Hospitality is meant to be a safe space – this is anything but!!

Do I hope secretly to see they are 'just like me,' in the Big brother house, or in the tales of the early church, or do I watch with relief that I am much better than they are, witness as I am to the car crash of their increasingly unlovely, unloving behaviour

towards each other, praying as I do, 'thank you God I am not like that,' the prayer of the Pharisee in the Temple on seeing the tax collector?

Do I watch because I want them to be like me, or because I am horrified to think they might be?

Here is my second observation about reality tv and the early church: Sadly, I think I am interested to watch because I am waiting to get to the shouting, to see their little experiment fail. I want to see again that they do not belong together, that the more usual tribal divisions in our society that put like with like in careful ghettos so we never have to rub up against different kinds, I wait to see these worldly patterns reassert themselves and to see it all fall apart.

What a disappointment it would be if they refused to criticise each other, if they all got along and shared and sacrificed – with generosity shared all things, and served each other? What boring viewing.

What would the producers do? I suspect, try to shake the boat a bit – deprive them of food, or cigarettes, or give some more power than others, or whatever. Shake them until they fight, so we get what we are paying for.

But reading the first passage we heard today, eavesdropping on the first big decisions the early church has to make without Jesus, I am encouraged, because the world's interest in conflict is not gratified! It will be later.

To review where we are... in the forty days after Easter Jesus has been physically real to his disciples and followers, the apostles, or witnesses: after this period of time he ascended into heaven, that is he didn't die again, but entered heaven and re-joined the God-head in all his humanity. This means two things for us: Jesus brought what it was to be human back to God – God had been chasing a rebellious humanity all across the Scriptures right from the garden, and in Jesus' ascension God finally caught up. God took what it was to be human into God's heart, and there it remains. Secondly, the Godliness of Jesus the man was freed from that specific time and place, so the Christ is able to be present with people of all times and places, bringing the presence of God with us to us too. No more is the Christ tied to that one spot in time and place, but God is loose among us.

An interesting point about Christian dogma (teaching) is that if you ask 'what do Christians believe,' you get an answer that is about what happened – Jesus was born, lived and healed, died, rose again, ascended to heaven – lives forevermore. Our Creeds (which we'll repeat at Baptism) are not laws of behaviour or points of abstract teaching, but stories about what God does. For God so loved the world that God sent his son, etc. And how the church behaves, how we each live so as to honour God, becomes part of that story. As with the big heroes of scripture, as with our no less heroic, though less recorded lives. The story of how we are together matters as part of our formal teaching – people learn about God from the ways in which God's people treat each other. And that's not always been good.

So now we come in the record of the Acts of the apostles to the ascension. The apostles have been told to wait until the coming of the Holy Spirit brings them power:

preview to next week, when we celebrate Pentecost – the overcoming of division, and founding of the church!

Here's the last observation -

I observe that we (I mean the big we – worldwide historical Christianity) often operate a more Big brother-ish way of figuring out who belongs and who doesn't, rather than a more Scriptural one. Is it any wonder we slip into the heresy of thinking God is the kind of God who would accept or reject us based on how good we can manage to be, rather than because we have known what it is to bask in the love of the one who made us?

With Christ ascended to heaven and loose in the world, we do not have a monopoly on witnessing the grace of God – no Christian tradition owns the ascended Christ. So if we will come to this table – dine with him, we will find ourselves next to some characters we least expect, and are very much unlike, and disagree with. And that is what church is about, at its most humble and direct. Not the way of the world, where we know we will in the end get to the shouting, but the way of Christ – who prayed for our protection and who answers prayer.

So, three observations about Big brother and the early church in Acts – one, that ironically, the makeup of the Big reality tv – set up to provoke conflict – is not dissimilar to the historical church. two, that I am attracted to watch and see partly because it should fail. Our society watches when the shouting starts. third, just because the story of Jesus and his table is at the heart of our church, we are not immune to the big brother way of working – we always have to guard ourselves from exclusivity by coming again to the table where all people are welcome – even us.

One last bit of eavesdropping: in the Gospel reading we overheard Jesus praying to God before his arrest. He prays passionately for his church, chapter 17 vs. 11: 'God protect them in the world, that they may be one as we are one.' He doesn't pray for the church to be one as the world has it, like with like, but one as Jesus and his Father, God and human reconciling the most other and loving together. Verse 13, Jesus prays 'that they may have my joy, made complete in themselves – joy, not niceness, or absence of conflict, or winning the competition as the world defines it, but joy. Verse 15: I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but protect them, from the evil one Verse 17: Sanctify them, that is, make them holy – I have sent them into the world!

Jesus prays that the church in the world

What it is, to overhear Jesus praying for the church, for us whom he has sent into the world. We who love to watch Big brother, and mark each other out of ten for dinner parties - we need these prayers and he prays them still in our hearts. And much more importantly, our world needs this prayer – needs to hear, just right now this week – that we can be one. That peace will be more durable than conflict – that God's grace will show a way to love each other across any divide we can imagine and some we cannot.

John Wesley never could have imagined the conflicts that would face us. He was much more worried about our believing that all people could be saved and in the reality of evil, and redemption, than anything else. But he believed we could not just

coexist, but could thrive. That the 'catholic spirit' would be a blessing not just for those who huddle together like with like, but in churches that make peace in and for our world. I have said before, if we think we are here to fill the pews, we have set our sights too low.

Have confidence, then, that God is at work. Read the scripture and eavesdrop on these beautiful, broken, graceful lives of our ancestors in the faith. And look on yourself, and your fellow Christians today with kindness.