

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, May 28, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32,35; John 17:1-11
“Giving and giving”

I need to say that the events of this past week took this sermon in rather a different direction than I had expected. That’s what happens when the Spirit moves.

So, two weeks ago, giving and belonging. Last Sunday, giving and receiving. Today, giving and giving. Or maybe more accurately, today, giving and giving and giving and giving.

What a journey it had been for Jesus’ disciples and closest followers. What a roller coaster ride. They had come to believe that at long last, the Messiah had come. They had heard his call to follow him, and they had left home, work, family, everything, behind and gone with him. They had seen him do miracles, heard him proclaim that the kingdom of God had come near. They had walked on high hills and mountaintops, both figuratively when things had gone well, and literally when he took them aside to pray, or that time when they saw him transfigured in all the glory of heaven that was rightfully his.

Sure, they had seen him get into trouble. There had been times when he had dared to challenge the religious authorities. There had been times when he had fallen foul of Sadducees and Pharisees. They had even been with him when he was chased out of town.

But through it all, they had been convinced that he was, in the words of the two disciples making their weary way home to Emmaus, *a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people* Luke 24:19. They had come to hope that he was the one who would redeem Israel, either in some religious, spiritual sense or in the more literal, political sense.

But in one short period of time, in less than 24 hours, in fact, they had seen it all come crashing down around them. Betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, burial: and all their hopes and dreams, religious or political, had disintegrated, turned to dust, and had lain smashed at their feet.

Then against all possibility, against all logic and sense, against everything that they knew about the world and the way things were, they had seen him alive again. Alive, a living, breathing, physical reality. And walking about, and appearing to them, and talking with them, and eating with them, just like he had always done.

And hope had returned. Their wildest dreams had suddenly seemed possible again – maybe even more possible now. After all, if he could defeat death, what on earth could possibly stand against him?

Then it all ground to a halt again. He left them. He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight, and they were left gazing up towards heaven, as he returned to be with his heavenly Father.

What now??? They had given so much, they had given up so much, they had seen their hopes built up, then dashed, then built up again. And now their hopes seemed dashed again. Was this the end? If it was not the end, when would it all end? How much more could they endure? How much was enough? What more could they give or do?

Not that he had been much help to them when they asked him about it.

⁶ . . . *‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’* ⁷He replied, *‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority . . .’* Acts 1:6-7. There was no clear answer and not much help there.

And there was something slightly foreboding about what he said next. ⁸*‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’* Acts 1:8. When you ask what lies ahead and all the reply is a vague, mysterious and enigmatic answer like that, it doesn’t exactly put the mind at rest.

And the roller coaster ride continued. Of course, we know what the disciples did not know at that point, that in a few days they would experience the tumultuous events of the first Christian Pentecost, with a violent wind blowing, and tongues of fire dancing around, and people speaking in languages that they had never spoken before.

For now, all they could do was stand looking up towards heaven, watching Jesus be taken from them, until two men in white robes told them to snap out of it. And they returned to Jerusalem and got together with the other disciples and devoted themselves constantly to prayer.

Was this the end? If it was not the end, when would it all end? How much more could they endure? How much was enough? What more could they give or do?

I found myself pondering questions like that after the news broke of the bombing in Manchester on Monday evening, and then again after the news of the murder of the Coptic Christians in Egypt on Friday. How much more can we endure? How much do will we

have to endure? When will it all end? What can we do?

Today is Ascension Sunday. Today we celebrate Jesus' return from life in this world to his place as Lord of all life at the right hand of God in glory. We remember and we celebrate how, in Paul's glorious words in Philippians 2,

⁹ *God ... highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,*

¹⁰ *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

¹¹ *and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

We remember, we celebrate, that the Christ who now reigns in power is the Christ who suffered and died as a result of human wickedness and the evil in the world. We remember, we celebrate, and we place our trust in God, through faith in him and in his resurrection, to bring God's final victory over sin and death and evil to its final completion in God's good time.

But that is not all that we can do. There is more. More that means giving and giving and giving and giving. More that we are reminded and challenged to do and to be by the presence of Nora this morning, and of all the children in our midst. Because giving in to hopelessness and despair and doing nothing is simply not an option for us who claim to be people of faith.

Andrew Greystone is a British writer, broadcaster, producer and speaker. He lives in Manchester. He presented BBC Radio 4's Thought for the Day on Tuesday. I want to close by reading what he said. It is quite long but I believe it is a real word from the Lord for this moment.

Thousands of excited young people gathered last night for a concert in the Manchester Arena, just a couple of miles from where I am now. For some, their tickets were a birthday or Christmas present. For others, perhaps a quick break in their revision schedule. Many of those young people saw and heard things they will never forget. For them, and for countless friends and family members of those who were killed or injured, the course of their lives has changed forever.

An event like this tears through the ordered fabric of our lives. We can find ourselves overwhelmed by anger, fear or deep sadness at the fallen-ness of our world, and the sinfulness of human hearts. If, as police are currently assuming, it was some sort of terror attack, then that was the precise intention. Random violence can't win any followers – but it has the power to destabilise us, even

those of us who aren't affected directly. It can stoke the flames of fear or alienation.

But that response is not inevitable. Through the night there have been a steady stream of reports of Mancunians and others finding practical ways to create a different current. In this multi-cultural city, Mancunians have used social media to offer rooms to strangers stranded in the city; taxi drivers have refused to take fares; hotels and coffee shops have offered safe spaces; people are donating blood. A powerful alternative message of solidarity and hope is challenging the message of hatred and fear.

Manchester has form in this. It's a city with a long history of resilience and recovery, of strong, creative and open-hearted community. In Corporation Street, just a couple of hundred yards from where last night's explosion occurred, there is a red pillar-box. It was at the epicentre of the devastating bomb blast in the city in June 1996. But the pillar-box remained undamaged, and it still stands as a defiant symbol of the city's endurance.

As the dawn breaks over Manchester, we join our hearts with all those who are grieving; those who are injured; and those who are fearful or traumatised.

In Manchester this morning and across the country people of all faiths and none will choose how we respond. For the vast majority that will mean facing down the narrative of hatred with a stronger narrative of compassion and community. We don't deny that the world is broken, and our hearts break for those who have lost children and friends, brothers and sisters. And yet in our hopes and our prayers and a thousand acts of defiant kindness we choose again, through gritted teeth, to live against the grain of terror, so that hatred will give way to understanding, fear be replaced by love, and despair be overwhelmed by hope.