

## **Sermon for Sunday 21 May 2023**

### **Sunday after Ascension Day**

I don't spend a lot of time in church looking towards the East window. But it's at this time of year that I remember that if I turn round I'd be looking at a picture of the Ascension. Jesus is rising up to heaven leaving the disciples below – looking upwards – just as described in our first reading from Acts today.

What a roller-coaster ride of emotions they had been through. Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the tension of his final days, the horror of his betrayal, arrest and trial, the devastation and sadness of His crucifixion and death. The grief of losing Him followed so quickly by the joy of His resurrection, and then the period of all those reassuring and very personal resurrection appearances. Perhaps, after all, things were going to go on as they had done before. Perhaps now was the time at last for Jesus to bring in the kingdom that he had talked about. But Jesus is evasive about what is going to happen. Instead, He promises the Holy Spirit,

tells them that they will be His witnesses to the ends of the earth, and leaves them. Somehow, they know this time that He really has gone. Whatever happens next it's going to be different, a new chapter. And Jesus says they have a job to do. Whatever the Holy Spirit is, it's going to have to be quite something. But they have learned to trust and obey Him. They stay together. And they pray.

In this season between Ascension Day last Thursday and the day of Pentecost next Sunday we are invited to do the same. To draw aside from all our usual preoccupations; to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to come and renew our faith and empower us to serve our Lord and Saviour.

Our reading from the Gospel of John invites us to eavesdrop on Jesus as He prays. Jesus has been taking a final opportunity at the Last Supper to teach His disciples face to face and to prepare them for what is to come. Now He prays for them. It almost reads as though Jesus has already left the world. He says to His Father: "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in

the world, and I am coming to you.” (11). And his prayer is not only for the twelve, but, as Jesus says a few verses on from our reading, for all those who will believe in Him through the witness of the twelve (20).

Jesus prayed for us – and we’re allowed to know what he said!

So – what does He say? It’s not easy to unpick the meaning in this deep and poetic prayer between the Father and the Son. To start with He has a conversation with His heavenly Father about glorification. The Father and the Son are intimately connected, and the glory passes from one to the other. Jesus is glorified through His death, resurrection and Ascension which demonstrate that He is indeed the Son of God. God is glorified in the completed work of Jesus on earth, and also in those who believe in Jesus and in God the Father. As followers of Jesus we have eternal life; eternal life means that we are invited into relationship with God the Father and God the Son and into that circle of mutual love between them.

So Jesus’ prayer invites us to see ourselves as drawn up to the heavenly places, as held, loved prayed for by Jesus and protected as successors of those first disciples.

And what does Jesus pray specifically for His disciples? He prays that they may be protected. This does not mean that they will avoid suffering, as Jesus made clear earlier in his words after the Last Supper, and as is clear in our second reading from 1 Peter. This is addressed to a Christian community who are experiencing persecution. Jesus prays for his disciples’ unity to be protected – that they may be one, as He is one with the Father. They are to be completely united in will, purpose, action and mutual love as Jesus and the Father are united. He is praying for the protection of the fragile new little community that will become the Christian church. And that is also his prayer for us, that we may all be one.

So where does all that leave us this morning – as we too look up at the figure of the risen Christ ascending on our East Window?

First, we're invited to contemplate the risen, ascended, glorified Jesus as He is seated at the right hand of His Father. To worship and praise Him in all His mystery and majesty. To thank Him for what He has done for us; for the forgiveness of our sin; for the gift of eternal life which brings us as beloved children of God right into the circle of love between Jesus and the Father.

Second, as I said earlier, we're invited to pray, as the disciples did, for the Holy Spirit to come; to refresh and renew us; to unite all Christians everywhere, and to empower us to serve God in our lives. To be witnesses for Him, whoever we are. To bring the good news to others.

And we can be encouraged because, unlike the disciples, as they were waiting and praying after the Ascension, we do know what happened next. The Holy Spirit brought an explosion of power, of joy, of love. Out of that emotionally exhausted group, who must have felt they had lost their Lord again, Jesus fashioned the Church – His body here on earth. And he has never given up on it.

Lord Jesus, Thy kingdom come.

Amen