

**Sermon Seventh Sunday of Easter 10am Parish Eucharist St Mary's Barnes
16 May 2021 preached by the Revd Sister Margaret Anne ASSP**

Three days ago on Thursday the Church celebrated the great feast of the Ascension. We could spend our time on thinking about the literal mechanics of how the Ascension of Jesus into heaven happened. But we would do much better instead to reflect on its deep and spiritual meaning. With the Ascension several important things were established about Jesus. It was the day his earthly life and ministry and mission reached its completion. He returned to the Father and resumed his rightful place in heaven, where – as our great high priest – he ever intercedes for us. With his ascension Jesus raised our humanity with him to the Godhead, restoring humanity's relationship with God, a relationship that had been marred, as the book of Genesis so graphically describes, in the garden of Eden. Ascension Day itself ranks as a feast of great importance, after Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, that great triad of feasts.

Eastertide lasts a total of 50 days: 40 days from Easter Day itself to Ascension Day, and then a further 10 days from the Ascension to Pentecost. Traditionally this 10 period which we are now in is a time of waiting on the Holy Spirit: a time of expectancy as we anticipate and pray for the coming of the Spirit in all its fullness at Pentecost. For some years now the Archbishops of Canterbury and York have called for this time to be an opportunity when the Christians of our land engage in fervent prayer, that people may grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ and that this may spread to others outside the Church. The Archbishops have called this prayer initiative "Thy Kingdom Come". This year there is an emphasis on praying for the persecuted Church in other lands. Given the events of recent weeks, we would also do well to pray for the people of India, struggling to cope with the terrible devastation of the Covid 19 pandemic that they are experiencing, as well as the peoples of the Middle East, where once again conflict has expressed itself in open violent hostility between Jews and Palestinians. At this time we pray too for the work of Christian Aid, which does so much to help the poorest peoples of the world. Today also marks the end of Mental Health Awareness Week. The global pandemic has shone a spotlight on many of the world's problems, not least the countless people who struggle to maintain their mental health in such challenging times. There is much to occupy our prayers.

It is a church tradition to have readings in our Sunday services from the Acts of the Apostles in Eastertide. And no wonder, for Luke's account of the Act of the Apostles is full of stories of amazing events and healing miracles and stories of new life bursting forth in people's lives; there is a lot of energy and joy as the new-born Church starts to flex its muscles and grow. Acts is full of an upbeat enthusiasm and energy that we associate with the meaning of Easter. In today's reading from the first chapter of Acts we have a passage that follows on from an account of the ascension of Jesus. The apostles and other followers of Jesus have returned to Jerusalem. Peter stands up and announces that they need to replace Judas who betrayed Jesus. They pray and cast lots between two of their number who are proposed as Judas' replacement. Matthias is the one who is chosen. This account demonstrates the importance of the Church carrying on its mission, regardless of whatever evils may assail it. The false will be replaced and overcome by the true.

As we approach the great feast of Pentecost in our collect for today we prayed that God would not leave us comfortless, but would send the Holy Spirit to strengthen us. In the gospel accounts, before Jesus died, he knew that he would need to strengthen his disciples for the time when, after the Ascension, they would be without his physical presence. So in John's gospel Jesus gives his well-known Farewell Discourse to his closest followers. In this discourse, shortly before our gospel

reading for today, Jesus warned his disciples that they would soon be without him. But then he comforts them with his assurance of the coming of the Holy Spirit. In the Authorized Version of the Bible, the King James translation, the Spirit is described as the “Comforter”. This literally means the one who strengthens, the one who comes with strength. In our modern New Revised Standard Version the word translated to describe the Spirit is the “Advocate”. This literally means the one “called alongside”, after the Latin. It is a legal term, describing the barrister who defends his client in a court of law, and who speaks up on the client’s behalf. Jesus is saying here that the Holy Spirit is like that – the Spirit accompanies us, and is totally there for us. After Jesus has died and later risen and then ascended and therefore gone away in terms of a reassuring bodily presence, the Spirit will come and indwell the disciples and rekindle their faith in and knowledge of Jesus. What is true for those early disciples can be true for us. We too can enjoy the indwelling of the Spirit – the Spirit’s gifts and fruits and graces growing within our lives and flowing out to others.

Following immediately on from Jesus’ Farewell Discourse is what has often been termed his great high priestly prayer, our reading today from John’s gospel. Here, in the presence of his closest followers, on the night before he died, Jesus prays directly to his Father in heaven. He begins by praying for his followers. He asks that after his departure, God will protect them. He asks that his followers may be one, as he and his Father are one. Jesus longs that his followers may have joy. He knows that his followers will encounter difficulties in terms of worldly opposition. He prays that God may “sanctify them in the truth”. Just as God has sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus is sending those who love him into the world. It is a beautiful prayer, and it continues with words beyond our gospel reading today in which Jesus famously prays that all may be one.

In these days between the Ascension and Pentecost – we wait. We wait expectantly for the coming of the Holy Spirit. There is a poem that I particularly associate with this time of waiting by the Welsh priest-poet RS Thomas. The poem is entitled Kneeling:

Moments of great calm
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun’s light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
 Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

