



# *Sixth Sunday of Easter*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



14 May 2023

### READINGS

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-19; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

## *Jesus prepares his disciples*

Greetings Friends. May I speak in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

We are nearing the end of Eastertide as this coming Thursday we commemorate the Feast of the Ascension. The Paschal candle in some churches is extinguished on this day, symbolising the disappearance of Christ from human sight. Other churches prefer to extinguish it at Pentecost. In any event, the two festivals of Ascension and Pentecost represent the culmination of the season of Easter and, with the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the ushering in of the season of Pentecost.

What then are we to say on this, the last 'normal' Sunday of Eastertide? What do our readings say? Our Gospel comes from the Farewell discourse of John, where Jesus is preparing his disciples for his immanent departure. Of course, this departure is in the form of his crucifixion and death, but the content is applicable preceding Jesus' ascension as well. The prospect of Jesus' departure occasions anxiety among the disciples and so part of Jesus' intention is to allay their fears. In doing so, he says that he will not leave them as orphans, but that he will send the Holy Spirit (or Advocate or Helper) to be with them forever.

So the passage is doubly relevant for it speaks not only of Jesus' departure (now in the form of his Ascension) but also of the arrival of the Holy Spirit, with Pentecost immediately following Ascension day. There are always recurring motifs though as we move through the liturgical calendar. Ascension Day is not unlike the Feast of Christ the King, which is the Old Year's eve equivalent in our liturgical calendar, the culmination of the whole liturgical cycle. Both feasts speak to the Sovereign Reign of Christ. This Sovereign Reign may also be seen as the realisation of Jesus' earthly proclamation, the immanent arrival of the kingdom of God. John is also different from the Synoptic Gospels in so many ways. For John, the lifting up, or ascension of Jesus, which for John is also his hour of glory, is Jesus' lifting up on the cross, his crucifixion. And, as we saw a few weeks ago, John's Pentecost takes place not fifty days after the resurrection but on the same day.

Given where we are though in our liturgical calendar, in this transitional period between Easter and Pentecost, where we, at the same time, focus on the heavenly reign of Christ, there is a sense of the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation. Ascension Day represents the end of Christ's earthly ministry, meaning that whatever he could and did achieve through his earthly ministry is now complete. And in some sense, he now hands the reigns over to us, empowering and equipping us, most crucially, through the Holy Spirit.

In one of our readings set for this Sunday, from Acts 17, Paul in his speech in front of the Areopagus, summarises the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation:

*"While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."*

(Acts 17:30-31)

Though for many the resurrection itself was an implausible event, Paul says here that the resurrection is proof of God's plan of salvation, proof that God has assigned a day when all creation will be judged by Jesus.

In Luke's account of the Ascension in Acts 2, the disciples suffer from heavenly gaze syndrome. And I sometimes wonder whether we too do not periodically suffer from the same condition, where we are so overly oriented towards the things of heaven and the things of the Spirit, that we forget about earthly matters. We should also take into account the fact that our conceptions about God are human conceptions, understood through human frames of reference.

Remember that for Jews living in the first century, whatever else the long-awaited Messiah would embody, he would at least be a Davidic figure who would grant them political liberation. This was part of their expectation of who the Messiah would be and, as a result, they could not accept Jesus as Messiah. In a similar way, we have been forced to reconceive the quality of God's kingdom. While not overtly political, does it still not have a bearing on political spheres? While not evidently physical, does it not encroach from time to time upon the physical realm?

Without wishing to foreshadow too much our reflections for the Feast of the Ascension, one theological implication which I feel is helpful to mention is that because of what is referred to as the two natures of Christ – that he should necessarily be both fully human and fully God – the net result of the Ascension is the incorporation of humanity within the Godhead, which on one level undoubtedly must signal the realisation of God's plan of salvation.

In light of this, and in light of the promise Jesus makes this Sunday not to leave us as orphans but to send the Holy Spirit in his stead to guide, empower and equip us, surely we have been given everything we need to fully realise the salvation given us in Christ Jesus. And so we pray as we enter this season of Easter that we would not neglect our day of salvation, but that God would awaken us to everything we have been given in Christ Jesus. Amen