

## Seventh Sunday of Easter – Year B

This past Thursday, we celebrated the feast of the Ascension – that occasion when Jesus *ascended* into heaven. It's not referred to directly in any of our readings today, but this Seventh Sunday of Easter finds us caught between losing the physical presence of Jesus, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday. Episcopal priest Suzanne Guthrie describes these 10 days between the Ascension and Pentecost as an “imposed pause, the anticipation of the promise of the Holy Spirit.” According to the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus ascended into heaven 40 days after the resurrection – and the Holy Spirit descended on the community of believers 10 days later, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, celebrated 50 days after Passover. Hence we have this “imposed pause” – a time of sitting, perhaps, with the grief of letting go of the physical presence of Jesus... and of entering more deeply into the awareness of the Oneness with God that Jesus speaks of in John's Gospel. It is out of that “empty space,” perhaps, that we prayed in the opening collect: “Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us...”

John never mentions the Ascension in his Gospel. Instead, we have the long “Farewell Discourse” of which this morning's passage is a part. But the same notion is there: Jesus says “And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.”

Whether the Ascension occurred as recounted in Acts, whether there were 50 days between Easter and Pentecost or whether Jesus actually breathed the Holy Spirit onto the disciples on Easter night, as John's gospel has it – I think none of that is so important. But what these intervening days of Ascensiontide *do* provide us with is the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of that bodily absence of Jesus.

The implications of that “absence” of the physical presence of Jesus are quite clear in the words of Teresa of Avila, that 16<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite mystic who is a favorite of mine. Her words were the text of the anthem at my ordination and I've spoken them several times since then, because they speak a truth that challenges us:

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
no hands but yours, no feet but yours,  
Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world  
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;  
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless (the world) now.”

This is the reality that Jesus is preparing his followers for, in the prayer we hear him praying in today's Gospel from John. Remember that the community of believers for whom John wrote his gospel were living in difficult times. They had recently been thrown out of the synagogue – told they were no longer part of the Jewish community. They surely felt isolated and alone. They had come to believe in God as revealed to them in Jesus – and were now being persecuted for believing, not just by the civil authorities, the Romans, but by their faith community, their relatives and friends. They were being told, in essence, that they no longer *belonged*. But in this short passage from John's Gospel that we have this morning, in which Jesus is praying for his followers, he twice says, “They are yours.” That is, those early followers, and *we*, **do** belong. We belong to God, and not to the world.

What does that mean? It does not mean that the world is evil. The most quoted line from John's Gospel is, “God so *loved* the world!” - No, what Jesus is acknowledging here is that even in the face of the Love and Light that is God, there are those who will choose darkness. And if we choose to believe in the God that Jesus reveals, then our values will be at odds with the values of “the world.” -- We *know* this. We experience this. The world, our *current* world, values accumulation – of wealth and power and influence; Jesus tells us not to store up wealth, to give it all away. The world tells us to keep things for ourselves, and Jesus tells us to share our bread. The world tells us to separate people into “us” and “them” – and Jesus says everyone is welcome, everyone is begotten of God.

Jesus says, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” I think this is, perhaps, one of the most challenging lines of scripture – because God sent Jesus into the world as the fullest expression of Godself, the Divine in human form, the Word made flesh. We are charged with continuing that Incarnation. And lest we miss this, Jesus tells us directly, in John's version of Pentecost on that first Easter evening when Jesus breathes the Spirit on the disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you...”

One of the things that drew me to the Episcopal Church is her focus on Incarnational theology. And at its heart is the conviction that God is not relegated to some heaven light years away – but that God is, indeed, here in this time and place, that the Divine Presence is expressed in all of creation, in each of us. And thus Christ’s mission, to bring all into the Oneness of God, is also our mission. Jesus prays for his followers, for us, “that they may be one, as we are one.” We are invited, then, into this mystical relationship whereby God’s glory, God’s presence, is revealed in our lives. We continue the work of the Incarnation, the “making God present” in our own lives. Christ has no body now but ours...

This Incarnational mission is what we commit ourselves to in the Baptismal Covenant – another element that drew me to the Episcopal Church. At baptism, and every year as we celebrate Easter and renew that Baptismal Covenant, we promise, with God’s help:

To continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers...

To persevere in resisting evil and to return to God when we fail...

To proclaim – by word and example – the Good News of God in Christ....

To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves...

To strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being...

In making those promises, we move beyond creedal statements, into the awareness that we each and all are called to live the mystery of the Incarnation.

“Christ has no body now on earth but [ours],  
no hands but [ours], no feet but [ours],  
[ours] are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world  
[ours] are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;  
[ours] are the hands with which he is to bless (the world) now.”

It’s all of a piece then. As Jesus tells us he is returning to the Father, we *do* need to reflect on what the physical departure of the body of Jesus means for us. Ours *are* now the feet and hands and eyes of Christ, if the Incarnation – God taking flesh – is to continue to be present. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit – whether after the Ascension or on Easter night – confirms what is already true: We are the body of Christ, the dwelling place of God, at one and the same time called and empowered to share that God of love with the world.

May it be so.

- [Acts 1:15-17, 21-26](#)
- [1 John 5:9-13](#)
- [John 17:6-19](#)
- [Psalm 1](#)