



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Seventh Sunday of Easter

readings: [Acts 1.6-14](#), [1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11](#), [John 17.1-11](#)

21 May 2023

On Thursday we celebrated Ascension Day, remembering Jesus' final post-resurrection appearances to his disciples before he returns to the right-hand side of his Father.

May this year has been particularly full of celebrations for me – May Day Bank Holiday celebrating Spring, the coronation, Eurovision, on Thursday I joined several hundred people for the annual well dressings at Tissington, my father turned 80 and my father-in-law 75 and today we are celebrating Carol's extraordinary service over the past five years as she prepares to move to Scotland.

Saying goodbye to people you have loved and cared for and worked closely with is always hard. This is what we see Jesus wrestling with in our Gospel reading and the disciples wrestling with in the passage from Acts.

Jesus's discourse in John takes place in the context of the Last Supper. Jesus has gathered his closest disciples together around the table after washing their feet, giving them the example of servant leadership. They have shared supper, taken bread and wine and been given a way of remembering him through broken bread and wine outpoured an act we shall revisit later in our worship. Jesus has spoken to them about the importance of loving him and keeping his commandments and spoken of the promise of the Spirit to be with them and to enable them to abide in the Father. The passage we read today comes at the end of his discourse, just before they go together to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus will be arrested while he is praying.

In the past couple of weeks, I've had the privilege of being at two different parties where we've said goodbye to Carol and heard her share with us the things that are on her heart and mind. Carol told us she had written down what she wanted to say so she didn't get too emotional and lose track of what she wanted to say.

Reading this section of John's Gospel, it reads rather clunkily, as though Jesus is struggling to navigate his emotion well and articulate clearly what is on his heart and mind.

He is very aware of the task his Father gave him to do – he speaks of glorifying God by having finished the work he was given to do and preparing to return home to the Father. As a mother with children away at university I miss them and am so looking forward to exams finishing in the next couple of weeks and having everyone back home for the summer. I can't help but wonder how it felt for Jesus to be separated from his heavenly father for those 33 years when he was used to being constantly present and united in a dance of love with the Father and the Spirit. How his spirit must have been longing for home.

But Jesus is concerned about those he is leaving behind. They have spent the last three years of their life following him around the Judean countryside sharing life together intimately, being taught by him, acting as his apprentices being a close-knit family and he knows he is going away, and they will be left to continue without him.

So, Jesus prays for them that God will protect them and unite them so that they can help and support one another and as the words of the song express it, 'be as Christ to each other'.

The older I get, the more I realise how difficult it is to sustain strong intimate friendships. As I've moved around the country, friends are more distant, responsibilities at work grow, financial demands increase, aging relatives need more time and care, I get tired more easily and my body isn't as strong and reliable as it used to be. Jesus is very realistic in his prayer. We need God's help, support and protection and we need one another and to work together not pull in opposite directions dissipating our energy and effectiveness but working collaboratively to make a difference and engaging with generous faith, courageous hope and life-giving love so that we help each other to keep God's commandments, live in love and be witnesses to the good news of Jesus that lives might be transformed, community built and our churches might grow.

In our Acts passage, we see the disciples just a few weeks later still trying to come to terms with what they have seen and heard and been caught up in. Paul records one of the last conversations they have with the risen Christ after his resurrection.

They are gathered together, and they are asking Jesus questions. *'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'*

That question seems to me like a banging your head against a brick wall moment.

Through the events of Jesus' passion there has been a constant refrain of questions and expectation - is now the time when you will be the Messiah we want and expect and overthrow the Roman occupation and set up your own kingdom here on earth.

The crowds cheered on Palm Sunday expecting him to come as king and ruler. In the Garden of Gethsemane one of the disciples drew his sword and started fighting cutting off someone's ear before Jesus stopped him. During his trial he was mocked, given a cloak and crown of thorns and the sign on his cross announced him as the king of the Jews and people taunted him 'if you are the son of God....' do something miraculous and save yourself.

Even at this stage, when Jesus is meeting with his disciples for the final time, they still haven't really understood who he is and what it means for him to be the Messiah and how God's kingdom works very differently to the kingdoms of the world that lie within their experience.

Jesus doesn't get frustrated with them but cleverly redirects their attention. *'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.'* Loosely translated by me as 'Mind your own business'.

Then he goes on to remind them what their business really is. What God is inviting, calling, and asking them into. *'But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.'*

That is Jesus' invitation to each and every one of us today too.

An invitation into ongoing relationship. While Jesus lived on earth, he could only be with a limited group of people at any one time. Now Jesus has ascended into heaven the Father has sent the Spirit to be with us for ever. Jesus is inviting us into a close, loving and intimate relationship of love with him. We are welcomed into the heart of the godhead, we are invited to join in the eternal dance and exchange of love that flows between the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and all who will receive God's love within themselves. Jesus offers to live within us by his Spirit and to work in and through us continuing his mission of bringing God's

kingdom near to all and offering the free gift of eternal life and salvation to all who will receive it. We are the ones whose lives testify and witness to the saving love.

When Jesus ascends, they remain watching the sky. Hold onto the precious memory. Creating a mental picture. Wondering what comes next and perhaps feeling reluctant to let go and move on. Wanting to treasure the moment and hang on to it. So, God graciously sends angels to help them move on and the disciples return together to Jerusalem, shut themselves away together and pray.

Across the globe, Christians in all countries are united in prayer at this time through the movement called Thy Kingdom Come. We are invited to commit ourselves to praying for our loved ones, family, friends, colleagues, neighbours to come to know the love of God and find salvation in him through putting their faith and trust in Jesus.

As a Cathedral we are part of this international wave of prayer as we seek to be faithful to Jesus' call and commission to us. To be open to receive the Holy Spirit, to be witnesses to Jesus and to be united together in prayer.

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