

## **Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter | 17 May 2026 | 10:45 Eucharist**

On this Sunday – the Seventh of the Easter season - we are ‘betwixt and between’. On Thursday past we celebrated the Ascension and next Sunday we will celebrate Pentecost.

Ascension Day is one of those neglected festivals of the Church’s calendar. Perhaps that’s because it’s often seen, wrongly, as only a day of return and farewell. Maybe it’s the awkwardness of the story – someone disappearing into the sky? But as Romita reminded us on Ascension Day, Ascension is all about God’s presence with us.

Without the Ascension, the whole dynamic of Jesus’ life on earth is lost and remains incomplete. Jesus the Son returns to God the Father, and our humanity finds its place in heaven. Within God for eternity Jesus our representative now lives and reigns over the universe.

At Pentecost, heaven overflows into earth, with God’s life made available to all peoples. In fire and sound of wind, the Holy Spirit is poured out over all the nations who gather in Jerusalem and that small group of vulnerable, afraid apostles are sent out into the world in power to proclaim the Good news of the Messiah who is risen, ascended and exalted above all things.

Today we are ‘betwixt and between’ Ascension and Pentecost. It’s time to pause – to gather our thinking about the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry and to prepare to receive once again the gift of the Holy Spirit. As we have prayed in our collect, our hope and our goal is that one day, our journey following the risen Jesus, we will be lifted up by the power of the Spirit into the unmediated, direct presence of God as one of Christ’s own.

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear the story of The Ascension. Forty days of resurrection appearances - like Israel in the desert for 40 years, like Elijah for 40 days on Mount Sinai, like Jesus himself spending 40 days in the wilderness, these were days of preparation for mission.

We recall the assumption of Elijah in ancient Israel, going up to heaven in a vision of a fiery chariot with his protégé Elisha asking for a double portion of his master’s spirit. The disciples return from Mount Olivet to the safety of their upper room. Like Elisha, they receive an abundance of God’s Spirit. In the scriptures, for Jesus, for the disciples, for the church prayer always precedes important events. More of that later.

But for a moment, reflect on what you say to those close to you if you are going off on a long journey or if you know you are not going to see them for a long time. Think about what you might say by way of advice and what you might pray. That will give us some clues to grasp what Jesus was saying to his disciples at that last supper

Last week we heard how Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another in the same way that Jesus had loved them. Just as Jesus had offered his life for his disciples' salvation, so they were to offer their lives in service to others. This week the focus changes, and instead of *commanding* his disciples Jesus *prays* for them. He prays three things:

First, Jesus prays that the disciples might be protected. Just as Jesus protected the disciples whilst he was with them in the world, so he prays that God the Father will protect the disciples when he departs from them. Jesus does not pray that the disciples will be removed from the difficulties of living and witnessing in the world but that they will be protected from everything and everyone who would destroy their unity and mission. For many Christians throughout the world fear of persecution is still a daily reality.

Then, Jesus prays that his disciples might be one, as he and the Father are one. The unity of the disciples is to flow from the unity of Father and Son, and their unity of purpose. Being one is not about everyone becoming the same. It's not uniformity. Jesus' prayer is that each of his disciples in their differences and variety, in the way that they give and receive, in their laying down and taking up might be drawn together as one. They are to become 'a unity' but in all their diversity. In a world of increasing fragmentation how much harder do we have to work to foster the unity of the church to bear witness to the God who lives in unity and without division.

Finally, Jesus prays that the disciples might know the truth. Later on, in the prayer Jesus prays that his disciples may be sanctified in the truth – hardly everyday language but to sanctify something is to make it holy, to set it apart for a particular purpose. Jesus is praying that the disciples will be set aside for the task of mission in the world. To be set aside in the truth is to be marked out by belief in the life, death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. In other words, the disciples are ones who will be known to live by the word of Jesus and in the light of his saving truth. And in a world which we speak of post truth, our lives saturated by social media, how much must the church rediscover a robust sense of living in the truth of God revealed in Jesus?

So, the *instruction* to the disciples as Jesus departs was to love one another. The *prayer* to God was that as they loved one another, they might experience protection, unity and be designated as people of truth in the world.

The disciples are to hold on to each other, witnessing to Jesus and never allowing the hostility of the world to divide them, in the same way that the world's hatred did not divide Father and Son on the cross.

At the Last Supper the disciples inhabited an 'in-between time' as they waited for Jesus' departure. On this Sunday in Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago, again they were 'in-between' but this time between Jesus' Ascension and Pentecost. And so, it is always for God's people. We always live in the between times, betwixt and between the birthday of the church and the hope and promise of the coming of God's kingdom in all its fullness.

To be betwixt and between is not about looking back to the past but it's about looking to the future and striving for the establishment of God's kingdom.

There are two challenges perhaps this morning.

First, the period of being betwixt and between is focused by the Church's ecumenical initiative Thy Kingdom Come. Please pick up from the back of the Cathedral a prayer booklet to enable each of us to join in the church's prayer for the gift of the spirit in this time of waiting and anticipating our celebration of Pentecost next Sunday.

But why not pick up a card with your prayer diary? It looks like this – five spaces to write the first names of friends, neighbour who you might pray for during this time. Thy Kingdom Come is a way of praying that God may extend his Kingdom even as God's spirit is offered afresh to the world. You might say – that's not for me – that's a little too formal for my taste. But why not try it, see whether it works. Its simply a way of the church – each of us – praying outward, beyond ourselves and our own needs – to embrace the world around us. To bring God's kingdom into being – a space full of love in a divided world, a space free from hate, from fear, from division, from fragmentation, from discrimination.

Second, this is our AGM Sunday. In few minutes over coffee, we will take time to reflect over the past year. We will celebrate our successes and share what we have learnt. We will look forward to the future and anticipate. Like the first disciples we will be 'betwixt and between' – acutely aware of our inheritance but aware there is so much to come. An AGM is a time to share vision and hopes for the future. It's a time to ask questions and to find out how each one of us of – ordained and lay – might practically share in the vision of this cathedral church as a centre for worship and mission in the diocese of Derby. Why not stay behind and share in our common life together?

Christians have understood Jesus' prayer for his disciples to be his 'high priestly prayer'. Jesus' prayer for his disciples at the Last Supper is his prayer for each of us today in the challenges we face together. In the big task in front of us, he prays that we might be protected from all which seeks to fragment the church; he prays for us to be together as one, as he and his Father are one; and he prays that we might be rooted in the truth of risen life; all this as we carry out his command to love one another.

In this Eucharist, as we offer ourselves in worship, we join with Jesus' self-offering before the heavenly throne, and by the power of the Holy Spirit our worship is united with his worship so that he becomes truly present amongst us in the bread broken and the wine poured out. Our offering in worship is united with Jesus' eternal offering in heaven and as we worship we can be assured that we are being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit into the sort of people that Jesus is praying for us to be – joyful, together as one, those who enjoy God's protection and who are rooted in the truth.

We are people who live 'betwixt and between', with challenges and opportunities as we journey into the future. In this Eucharist and every time, we meet, God is drawing us nearer to himself and to the vision he has for each one of us and for his people the church.

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