

Ascensiontide ...

... 'Keep on sailing'

A sermon given on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, 29th May 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

John 17:20-end

Well, happy Ascensiontide: last Thursday was Ascension Day, the last of the three great festivals of Jesus's earthly ministry, along with Christmas and Easter. So we surely ought to be sending one another cards and exchanging gifts, or at least chocolate and generally making festival. Yet somehow Ascension Day doesn't quite come off in the same way that Christmas and Easter do; doesn't quite have the same impact. Maybe that's because in our country it's not a public holiday, unlike most European countries. Or it may be that we're not quite so clear about what the point of Ascension Day is. At Christmas, we know there's a clear message: Jesus, the Son of God, has become one of us, and that's clearly good news; and at Easter, we know that Jesus is raised from the dead, and that's clearly good news; but at Ascension, Jesus returns to heaven - how is that good news? Surely there's still work to do. So maybe we don't celebrate the ascension because we're not quite so confident what exactly we're meant to be celebrating. And maybe the mood of Ascensiontide is less obviously upbeat, because there's a sense in which for the disciples, the ascension of Jesus to heaven is a bereavement: he's leaving them and they are left a little bit lost and bewildered. So our response to Jesus's ascension isn't entirely straightforward, and that ought to invite us to interrogate it, to think about it, ask questions, and to wonder what's really going on here.

So why has Jesus left us? Why isn't he still here on Earth? Surely there is still more than enough for him to do? Well, there's quite a lot in the Gospels and particularly John's Gospel, where Jesus explains to his disciples that he's going to go away, but then he's going to come back. Part of that is about preparing them for his death and resurrection. But it's also about ascension and Pentecost. Jesus has to go away so that the Holy Spirit can come. The historical Jesus was one man living at one particular moment in history and in one particular part of the world. But the Holy Spirit is at work all through history and in every part of the world. And the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, given to the Church to make Christ present and to continue his

work. So in that sense, Jesus hasn't left us at all. As he himself promised, he is with us always.

But on the Sunday after Ascension Day, we are still waiting for Pentecost; we are still waiting for the Spirit to come, like those first disciples. And yet Jesus has departed. So I think we're allowed to feel a little bit bereft. Jesus has left because his work on Earth is complete. Now, it's not quite the same as saying that God's work is complete - God the Father still has a purpose to accomplish for his world, and God the Holy Spirit still has much to do. But the Son has sat down at the right hand of the Father. He still has a role in heaven, interceding for us all, but his earthly work is done. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending. And in this sense, Ascension Day completes the work begun at Christmas (so you can take the decorations down now): at Christmas, the Son of God in his divinity, as it were, comes down from heaven to Earth; at the ascension, Jesus, the Son of man in his humanity, as it were, goes up to heaven. So the two have to be seen together. The Son of God becomes the Son of man, so that the children of men and women might become the children of God. And as far as that process is concerned, there's no more needing to be done by Jesus here on Earth. His work is complete in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. It is finished because now our human nature has been taken up into heaven in the person and humanity of Jesus and the work of healing, teaching, forgiving and loving which Jesus began is continued by the Holy Spirit.

On this Sunday after ascension, there is a sense in which we may feel we have been abandoned by God, like those first disciples. We may accept in our head that the work of Jesus is done, but emotionally it may be perhaps we just feel the loss.

It's an appropriate moment for us to be saying goodbye to Tim and his family, not because he's going to intercede for us at the right hand of God, though I hope he will remember us in his prayers, but because this is also a moment when, on the one hand, we are sad that Tim is leaving us, but we're also hugely thankful for all that he has done whilst he's been here.

And in Ascensontide, the Church is allowed to feel sad that Jesus is no longer visible and we can no longer touch him and be with him physically; yet there is also a tremendous sense of gratitude and thanksgiving for all that he has accomplished to redeem and save the world. Meantime, we wait for the Spirit. And the mood of this

ascension guide is a mood of patient waiting, of quiet trust and of disciples coming together in prayer.

We've seen God powerfully at work in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, so we can have confidence that he will complete God's purpose for the world and for you and me. In the midst of our sense of loss and the absence of God, we can trust that he is faithful because he has shown himself faithful to Jesus. And on that basis we can go on patiently waiting, coming together and praying.

There's a lovely story about Christopher Columbus journeying across the Atlantic for the first time in the hope of finding new worlds but not absolutely sure that there was anything there. And day after day after months at sea, he wrote the same thing in his log: 'No land yet; kept on sailing.' So for us we live between the now and the not yet; the gap between the beginning of God's Kingdom and its fulfilment. Jesus is no longer physically present, but because of his ascension, we anticipate the coming of his Spirit. We know we're going in the right direction because of all that God has done in the past. All we have to do is hold our nerve and trust Him, waiting patiently, coming together and praying as the churches together are doing this week.

We may not yet see the land, but we can keep on sailing and we do so with the confidence of those who know that God has been faithful in the past and he will keep his promises as we look to the future.

Reading Text

John 17:20-end

²⁰ I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,* so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ 'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'