

Sunday 13 May (Sunday after Ascension, Easter 7), Evensong

Psalm 69: 1-18; Isaiah 61; Luke4: 14-21

+ I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.' (Is. 61: 10)

In May of the year 735, the Venerable Bede (monk of Jarrow) sat dying in his cell. As he weakened, he kept trying to sing the antiphon of the Magnificat for Ascension Day (the feast that we kept last Thursday): 'O King of glory, Lord of might, who didst this day ascend in triumph above all the heavens, leave us not as orphans, but send to us the promise of the Father, even the Spirit of truth. Alleluia.'

But he struggled to say the words, 'Leave us not as orphans' (or, in the words of the Book of Common Prayer collect for today: 'leave us not comfortless') and broke down and wept. An hour later he tried again; 'and so it was every day', his companion reported, until the end. On the evening before Ascension Day, sitting on the floor of his cell he sang, 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit', until he breathed his last.

To one facing his own imminent death, the Ascension of the risen Christ back to the Father in heaven might self-evidently appear a loss too hard to bear. We can see why in his mortal sickness Bede might have felt like an orphan bereft of comfort. But is that how we should respond to Christ's Ascension as we commemorate it in the cycle of our own liturgical year? Are we, too, to mourn the absence of Christ, who has been so present among us in these forty days since Easter, and so turn all our efforts to pleading with God to send us the comforter, the Holy Spirit, to make us feel complete and cherished once more?

For the past two years our archbishops have sought to turn this period between Ascension and Pentecost, when we mark the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples in tongues of fire, as a time dedicated to praying to God, 'Come Holy Spirit: Thy kingdom come'. What was, in 2016, a national attempt to get all believers to find in themselves a new confidence and joy in sharing their experiences of life-transforming faith, has now turned into a global prayer movement. We are to keep this period as a Novena, nine days of prayer in which we are urged to pray for the Holy Spirit to empower us in new ways, to wait for a renewing experience of God's strengthening to us, and our Christian communities.

All believers are of course bound by Christ's injunctions to witness to our faith and our confidence in his saving promises. He charged us to seek to bring others to share in that belief. The aspiration at the start of the booklet for the Novena, that we should explore through prayer how we might courageously witness to God's life-changing work, is indeed admirable.

But – at the risk of speaking out against the senior hierarchy of the Church of England – I am not convinced that Ascensiontide is the right moment for this sort of initiative. Especially not one that is so obviously tied up with a particular kind of approach to mission and of expressing an individual's commitment to Christ.

Ascensiontide is a very short ecclesiastical season; it does indeed only last for nine days. But in those nine days the whole Church has to make an important transition. We have to prepare to leave our Easter alleluias behind and get ready for the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples,

the event which marked the birth of the Church and the launch of its mission to the world. It is easy to forget how much Ascensiontide resembles other periods of *waiting* in the church year. A little like Advent, or Holy Saturday, Ascensiontide is an interim period; it lies between promise and fulfilment.

In this interval we should pause and reflect, while we wait upon the Lord. It is an error to see this merely as a transitional moment, one to be hurried through as fast as possible until we reach the real business of the Church, given the power of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. We should make space to exalt and worship the risen Christ, ascended into heaven and seated on the right hand of the Father. There is no rush. If we allow time itself to become a gift, we might even find some joy in having a period of waiting.

When St Luke described the Ascension at the very end of his gospel, he narrated how Jesus had opened the disciples' minds to understand the scriptures, and then appointed them to be his witnesses, promising that the Father would clothe them 'with power from on high' to perform their appointed task. Finally, Jesus led them out to Bethany, blessed them and while he was still blessing them, he was carried up to heaven.

What did the disciples do then? Did they run away (as they had in the garden when Jesus was arrested)? Did they sit on the ground and start weeping because Jesus had left them, left them as orphans without a comforter. No. Far from it. Two angels came and asked them why they were looking up to the sky. They promised them that the same Jesus who had been taken from them into heaven, would come back in the same way that they had seen him go. And so, as Luke reported, the disciples worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; thereafter they were continually in the temple blessing God.

For the disciples, and for us, the Ascension is an event of great significance, a display of God's mighty power similar to that of the resurrection. It marks the return of Jesus to the Father, his resumption of the glory he left behind when he humbled himself to take on human flesh and dwell among us. As Isaiah prophesied, God has now clothed Jesus with the garments of salvation, covered him with the robe of righteousness. Jesus' ascension marks the completion of his work on earth, it opens the way for the sending of the Spirit and all the wonderful gifts that come with the Spirit. But most importantly it assures us of Jesus' triumph, his rule over all creation. The fact of his ascension gives us confidence that he is even now there in heaven praying for us, his children. It assures us, further, of his promise of his second coming in power and in glory.

We should use this time not to lament the absence of the Spirit but to follow the example of the disciples by being constantly in our churches and chapels, praising God. Let us strive to take joy in the fact of our ascended Lord and bless God in our worship, just as the Venerable Bede was finally able, when he felt his death approaching, confidently to announce his faith in the triune God. He will not leave us as orphans, or without comfort. As we wait for the fulfilment of his promises, let us rejoice in our Christ our Saviour, who has brought us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Risen and ascended Lord, you promised to be with us always.

Teach us to recognise your presence among us, and to abide in your love,

that we may walk in the way that leads to glory, where you live and reign with the Father and Holy Spirit, One God, world without end. AMEN