

**The Sixth Sunday of Easter**  
*Gloucester Cathedral, 2022*

*Acts 16:9-15*  
*John 14:23-29*

Alleluia! Christ is risen.  
**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

I wonder whether you have the same experience that I do sometimes, where a particular passage of Scripture has incredibly strong associations? It might be something you heard read at school, or at the funeral of a friend, or at your confirmation. Whenever you hear that passage you are right back in the place where you heard it first, or where those particular words did that thing in your heart and in your mind?

It's a happy coincidence, or perhaps the beating of the wings of the Holy Spirit, that my first, and quite possibly my only, sermon as Succentor of Gloucester is on a passage from the part of the Gospel according to John that we tend to refer to as the 'farewell discourse', because my associations with *this* passage are all Gloucester Cathedral. John 14 to 18 are set to be read during the Maundy Thursday Gethsemane Watch, and I don't know whether that still happens here, but back in the day it certainly did. And whenever I hear these sections read I find myself in the Lady Chapel, hearing Neil Heavisides' voice reading the Scripture from behind me somewhere in the shadows of the late evening on the Thursday before Easter. Indeed so profound was that imprint that I stole the practice and used it during the seven years that I was Precentor of Salisbury.

And it's one of those little gifts of the lectionary that having heard these words from the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of St John in that

strange, uncertain, in-between place of the darkness of Maundy Thursday night, we next hear them *now*, during Eastertide, as we approach another strange and in-between time in Christian year: Ascension, and the awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. On Thursday we will gather to recall Jesus' return to heaven, to the right hand of the Father, and then there will be nine days of waiting before the great Day of Pentecost. Those nine days, like that strange silence towards the end of Holy Week, are slightly unsettling. There's a pensiveness, there is a tension to that waiting. There is a promise, but it has not yet been fulfilled. There is expectation. There is hope but also bereavement. There is a gap into which we hope in faith that God will come.

My principal at theological college used to have all the pews taken out of the chapel for the nine days in between Ascension and Pentecost, to remind us of, in his words, "the goneness of God. I don't think a succentor has the authority to do similar here, and you may be very pleased about that.

At the heart of today's gospel reading - and bear in mind that these are words spoken by Christ to his disciples before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, though we are hearing them now in the Easter season - at the heart of the reading is the promise of abiding. The rather clinical translation that we use in worship says this: "those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." But the Bible I use at home, and the King James also, uses the word "abide", which I think is rather more beautiful. The promise from the Father and the Son is that, if we respond to that offer of love, God will abide with us. "The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide."

And the abiding, the taking up of a home with us, is the province of the Holy Spirit. He, or she, whom we await, the one who is

the breath and the kiss of God, is the Person of the Trinity by whom we find that we live with God. We will come, and will abide with you.

And, of course, that language of making a home, of setting up camp where we are is shot through the whole of John's Gospel. Think back to Christmas: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It's not the same word in Greek, but both of them carry the same emphasis on being present, being visible, being made manifest. God is really coming. God is really here. In the words of the Tradition: God is Really Present.

And there's a connection here with the Eucharist isn't there? The past couple of years have really forced us to think hard about exactly what we believe is happening Holy Communion. And if you think back to those darkest days of lockdown which, God willing, are now behind us, when we were all locked up in our own homes, even in that extreme place of it being illegal for Christian people to gather together to break bread, bread was still broken, sometimes by just the priest on their own, and we were reminded by the letter sent by our bishop, reminded by the tradition, that even in that extreme, uncomfortable and deeply deficient place, Christ was Really Present. And those of you joining in this act of worship from your own homes now have that same reassurance: wherever you are, even if you are not physically connected to this altar and this bread, Christ is Really Present, and through the operation of the Holy Spirit God abides with you.

On the Day of Pentecost in the cathedral we will restore the common cup to the congregation. A moment of profound significance. Something that it is time to do, for the sharing in both the bread and the wine are precious to our Reformation identity, but again, not essential. Whether you choose to receive

from the chalice in a fortnight or not – and a number of considerations will influence your decision -, again it is just really important to remember that Christ is not divided. You don't get 50% of Christ in the bread, and 50% of him in the wine. In even the tiniest fragment of the Host, in even the tiniest drop of the Sacred Blood, the whole of Christ, soul and divinity, abides. Impress your friends over lunch by telling them we did the doctrine of concomitance this morning. Because we just have.

Because the Holy Spirit is not rationed. This isn't like a pint of milk, that when it's gone it's gone. Abiding with us is the promise of the Holy Spirit, and when, in a few moments, the Holy Spirit is invoked upon the gifts on the altar, though you may not see it, there are thousands of angels, and thousands of saints, and the life in all its fullness, not rationed, not portioned out in meagre packets, but abundant and glorious and ever flowing.

'Do not let your hearts be troubled', said Christ, 'and do not let them be afraid'. We hear those words, as did the disciples, on Maundy Thursday night as the world around them crumbled. We hear them now, as we approach these strange nine days when Christ returns to heaven and we wait for that which has been promised us: the eternal abiding of the Spirit. We heard those words in the depths of lockdown, when we were separated from the Sacrament, and needed to reach deep into the tradition to remember that even when we can't hold out our hand and touch Christ, he is here nonetheless.

There is a hymn in our hymnbook which is sometimes sung on Maundy Thursday evening, which has a line in it that says, "we know you are present, though just out of view, to greet those who gather in remembrance of you."

We are peeping through the veil, beloved. There is glory present, though just out of view. Every crumb, every drop, is the entirety of the promise. Whether or not we actually receive on a given Sunday, we know that Christ is Really Present. Grace is pumped into the world where the bread is broken. The world is being transformed, and it is being transformed because the Holy Spirit is abiding with us. The promise and gift of the Father and Son is already here, though the full glory is just out of view. It was true on Maundy Thursday, it was true in the pandemic, and it is true today. This is Easter faith. Nothing is as it was.

Wherever, like Lydia, we can scrape together enough hope to say, “come and stay at my home”, the Holy Spirit, transforming the everyday into morsels of the kingdom, will come and abide with us.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**