

The Sunday after Ascension 2024

Evensong, St Thomas, Salisbury

Isaiah 61

Luke 4:14-21

May the words of my lips, and the meditation of all of our hearts, be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

There is some confusion over this Sunday, in the tradition. Since the year 2000, the Church of England has asked us to call today the Seventh Sunday of Easter. That is the Church of England following the Roman Catholic Church, who renamed this Sunday in the mid-1960s. The Book of Common Prayer, and our own Rector, by the looks of the notice sheet, are clear that today is the Sunday after Ascension Day. And of course for many people, who couldn't or didn't get to church last Thursday, today is actually the day when most of us think about the return of Jesus to heaven, 40 days after his resurrection. So, de facto, today is Ascension Day.

And whilst that's a bit messy, actually it sums up the themes perfectly. Whatever you call today, as we trace the story of Christ, which we began in Advent, and have retold, as we do every year, we have got to the point now, after his resurrection and 40 days of appearances, when he has returned to heaven - whatever that means. Returned to the Father's side - whatever that means! And the disciples are told to wait until the Comforter is sent to be with them - whatever that means! During lockdown a few years ago, preparing one of those little audio reflections for this time of year, I discovered that there is

one denomination, I can't remember which, which calls today 'Expectation Sunday'. And that, it strikes me, is an excellent title. Expectation Sunday. And it fits perfectly with that verse from our second lesson this evening: 'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him'.

In that instance, Jesus was just about to speak: words of prophecy, words of wonder, building of course on Isaiah's own prophecy of some hundreds of years earlier. But in that moment just before Jesus begins to speak, there is a sense that everybody in the room knows that they are about to hear something extraordinary. They don't quite know what. But there is a sense, in the way in which Luke describes the event, that there was a palpable sense of expectation. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

In these nine days in between the Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Whitsun, all the disciples could do was watch and wait with expectation. With anticipation. With hope.

We, living in between the coming of the Holy Spirit and the final coming of the Kingdom, live with a similar sense of expectation, and anticipation, and hope. But we do so with the knowledge that the Holy Spirit dwells within each receptive heart. Comes to us in the Sacraments, the word of Scripture, and the prayers of the Saints. So, those words that the choir have just sung become our daily prayer: 'O Comforter, draw near. Within my heart appear and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.' What are you expecting, I wonder? For what do you live with a sense of expectation? Can we live every day as Expectation Day, believing that the Holy Spirit might speak to us, might kindle us, might provoke us to some work of faith? And what might a life like that be like?

Amen.