

**The Sunday after Ascension Day (Easter 7)**  
*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels and St Mary Magdalene,*  
*Hewelsfield, 2023*

*Acts 1:6-14*  
*John 17:1-11*

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

Amongst the things that I wasn't particularly good at at theological college, learning Greek was probably the winner. And even though 16 years have past since then, every time I hear John chapter 17 read, I get this cold chill down my spine, because John chapter 17 was part of the set text for my Greek exam. And my Greek exam, in 2007, took place on Ascension Day. So hearing today's gospel reading sends me right back to a sunny Ascension Day morning in Cambridge, walking over to the Divinity Faculty to sit an exam I knew I was going to do badly in, and where I knew I was going to be asked questions about John chapter 17, in Greek.

So if you don't mind, I'm going to leave that reading alone for a little bit until I feel a bit braver.

Let's think about the reading from the Acts first. We are in this really lovely part of the church year, in between Ascension Day which was last Thursday, and the great feast of Whitsunday, or Pentecost, this time next week. And this time of year is often referred to as the birthday of the church, because we hear the stories of the very first Christians starting to work out what it might be like to be a community, without Jesus's physical presence with them.

Let's think back over the stories we've been hearing since Easter Day. They have been stories about the resurrection appearances of Jesus. Pretty amazing stories, stories about a man who can walk through a locked door, who can appear alongside two people walking towards a distant village, and then disappear just as quickly. Stories about the fact that Good Friday was not the end of the line, and that death is not the end either.

But Jesus is there. For all of the extraordinary, miraculous happenings, there is this reassuring presence of Christ back amongst his disciples, transformed, but still there, and able to eat breakfast, and sit down at tables.

But on the 40<sup>th</sup> day comes the farewell. The resurrected presence of Jesus ascends into heaven, whatever that might mean and however it might look. People really struggle to come up with an image or a picture that doesn't look slightly ridiculous. Like a rocket man shooting up into the sky, or those rather preposterous statues of two stone feet poking out of the roof. If you haven't seen those types of imagery, just Google 'Ascension of Jesus statue'. It'll give you a jolly good giggle.

But we are asked to wrap our heads around the idea that in order to come closer to us, Jesus goes away. Which sounds paradoxical. It sounds ridiculous. If Jesus wants us to be his family, why does he go away? And so we are left, stranded as it were, on this Sunday in between Ascension Day and Pentecost, thinking, 'oh, right then. He's gone. What do we do now?'

And actually anybody who has lost someone they love, and who has sat at a funeral and heard people like me saying things like the fact that although their physical presence has gone away, we are not ultimately separated from them forever, because of the life of the kingdom of heaven, probably can imagine something of the sort of grief that the disciples might feeling. They thought

they had lost Jesus, and he came back, and now he's gone again. The sense of loss must have been considerable.

But of course the reason why people like me say things like that at funerals is because we believe that it is true. So just before Jesus ascends into heaven he says to his disciples, 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses.'

The Holy Spirit, the presence and the power of God moving in the world, the Holy Spirit that theologians have referred to over the ages as the 'soul of the Church', and as the breath and kiss God within us, is promised to those confused men and women as an experience and encounter of God will be even deeper, more profound, and more long lasting than even the physical presence of Christ. Because the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the divine Trinity, utterly God, takes up residence in the middle of your life, in the middle of your heart, and in the middle of us as a congregation, as a community, as a Church. And that begins growth of a relationship that will last beyond the grave and out into eternity.

So you will notice that at the end of our reading from the Acts this morning we are told that after the Ascension the witnesses go back to Jerusalem and they begin a Church. They go to the upper room where the 11 remaining faithful disciples are, together with Mary, and lots of other men and women. What they do? 'All of these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.' They do what Christians do. They meet together, and they pray. And although our reading stopped just before this bit, the other thing that they do is that they elect someone to replace Judas Iscariot. They make the congregation complete again. They draw people in. Why is this hopeful? Well I'm feeling a bit braver now, so let's turn to John chapter 17 in closing.

The whole of chapter 17 is a long prayer. Quite heavy going to read, and to hear. Because there is no action, there's no story. This is Jesus talking to the Father just before his arrest and crucifixion. And it's a vision of the future of the friends of Christ. The family of God.

And what is the vision? Eternal life. Jesus says, 'Father, you have given the Son authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.' What does eternal life mean? 'And this is eternal life, that they may know you.'

However we might want to imagine an ongoing relationship with God, something that endures beyond this physical world and this mortal life, and again people have struggled to depict that - you know, harps and clouds and whatnot - however we might imagine that, it is basically about a relationship. It is about knowing God.

What we are being drawn into is a relationship. It is the promise of company through this life and out into the next. Because it is the promise that the Holy Spirit comes to reside, to abide, in our hearts, and slowly, slowly, through love and companionship and growth we are given divinized. We become more and more the children of God.

And that of course models hope for the world. So at the end of our gospel reading Jesus prays for our unity. Because unity now, or at least striving for unity, offers an antidote to the division and selfishness and individualism of the world.

So though we may only be a handful here today, we are doing exactly what we are called to do: Gather together, persevere in prayer, be united. And grow, slowly, slowly, into a people fit for eternity. A! XP.