

**The Seventh Sunday of Easter 2020**  
*Coventry Cathedral, preached via YouTube*  
*The Parish of Tidenham, preached via YouTube*

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

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

Luke alone, out of the gospel writers, gives us the story of the Ascension. Unless you include the longer ending of St Mark's Gospel, and there are a bunch of reasons to be a bit careful with the last few verses of Mark. But Luke is so taken with the story that he gives it to us twice: firstly at the very end of the gospel that bears his name - we heard that version on Thursday - and secondly in the first verses of the Acts of the Apostles. We just heard that version read this morning.

And the Ascension is one of those stories that has challenged artists and preachers over the years. One of my least favourite depictions of the Ascension is the statue in a church in Norwich diocese which just has two plaster feet sticking out of the roof of the chapel, with kind of zappy bits of lightning shooting out, as if Jesus is blasting through the stonework on his way back to heaven. A kind of rocket man.

A similarly weird but slightly more helpful bit of physical preaching that I remember from the theological college which I trained was the tradition instituted by the Principal of removing the pews from the chapel for the nine days in between Ascension Day and Pentecost. The chapel would stand virtually empty, with just a few seats around the walls. This, our Principal told us, was to symbolise the "gone-ness of God." This was a waiting period, he said, and all of our usual assumptions about

the world needed to be put to one side as we, symbolically with the disciples, see our risen Lord returning to heaven, and wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit.

The thing with the chairs is more helpful to me than the thing with the dangling feet. But both are inadequate, I guess, in trying to put a finger on what these nine days in the liturgical calendar of the church have to say to us. But I think it is something to do with waiting. Something to do with tuning our hearts, our minds, and our souls to the frequency of the Holy Spirit. As if we are twiddling with the tuner of our radio to try to find Test Match Special. We discipline ourselves in these nine days to tune into the promptings and murmurings of the Holy Spirit. We tune into what it means to be a people for whom Christ has ascended.

Some denominations apparently call this Sunday "Expectation Sunday", and I think that's rather wonderful. Expectation Sunday. What are we expecting?

Because actually these nine days, each year, feel to me in many senses the most 'realistic' bit of the church's calendar. Because we spend our lives, don't we, living in the in-between time. Living between the resurrection and the fullness of the kingdom. And actually that demands of us patience, and a bit of trust in God that his promises are actually going to come true. Actually it demands a *lot* of trust in God.

This year we have lived the entirety of Easter in lock down. I haven't been in a church building since 17 March. I haven't left my house since 25 March. And the world has felt pretty uncertain to me. This is a good opportunity to examine how patient we are. How trusting we are in God's promise. And to try to connect those tricky theological dots that will help us to understand a world in which Christ is risen, and in which we

believe the Holy Spirit is active, but which is still beset with so much that is sinful, evil and cruel. I wonder how you are squaring coronavirus with Easter? I wonder how you square your own sorrows, griefs and hardships with Easter?

I think one of the traps that is helpful to avoid is to think that the period in which we live now is a sort of misery which we have to sweat through before we get to heaven. There is *some* truth in that kind of approach, but it cheapens the here and now.

Actually it cheapens the resurrection as well. The whole point about Easter, the whole point about Christmas as well, is that God meets us where we are, and begins the process of hallowing, sanctifying, loving us into the kingdom here. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived through the hell of the Nazi period says this: “the Christian hope of resurrection sends a person back to his life on earth in a wholly new way. This world must not be prematurely written off... Christ takes hold of a man in the centre of his life.” Excuse the exclusive language.

As Christ ascends, and the Holy Spirit is gifted to us, God takes hold of us in the centre of our lives. Here. Now. And that means that we begin, slowly, oh so slowly, but surely, to be conformed to the image of Christ here. Now. The great Cistercian monk Thomas Merton put it like this, in a revelation he had when he was hanging around on a street corner in Louisville: “I have the immense joy of being a member of a race in which God himself became incarnate. And if only everybody could realise this! There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

What might it mean if that is true? What might it mean to live every day like the nine days in between the Ascension and Pentecost? What might it mean if every day was Expectation Day?

Maybe we can all take some time during this lockdown period to try to make sure that when our lives return to ‘normal’, whatever that might mean, we carry that expectation with us. We reshape our lives, or rather we actively expect the Holy Spirit to reshape our lives, to take hold of us in the centre of our lives, and in the midst of the trials, and sorrows, and griefs and diseases that beset us: even there, especially there, we expect that God can form us into a people who walk about shining like the sun.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.