

‘I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord.
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.’

So reads the section of the Apostles’ Creed that we say at Morning Prayer that deals with the work and person of Jesus Christ. In the course of the Church’s year we reflect on these various stages, his birth, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection. Then this last week the Church observed the Feast of the Ascension.

If we are going to continue saying these words; if we are not going to get sucked back into a flat earth, 3-decker universe, we need to ask ourselves, ‘What do we mean? What truths are being affirmed in our doctrines, in the biblical passages referring to the Ascension?’

I have always found it more productive to think of Good Friday, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost as interconnected, as an evolving process through which men and women, traumatised by their grief, sense of guilt and failure as they fled from the cross were transformed into evangelists; a process that was to culminate in the undeniable fact of the world wide one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church in all its divine glory and human frailty.

Resurrection speaks of a living, dynamic presence of Jesus who had taught, ministered and healed; this same Jesus who was crucified, they experience as living in their presence. The period from Ascension to Pentecost marks a period of transition; in one sense a letting go, in another a deepening experience. God present and active in his Church – not just in Jerusalem, in Palestine but wherever, to whom ever it will spread. Present where two or

three are gathered together in his name, present where bread and wine are shared in obedience to his command, in remembrance of his death and resurrection; present moreover in the poor, the weak, the marginalised of whatever race, class, creed or colour.

The Gospel reading appointed for Ascension Day is Luke's account of the ascension. Prior to his final parting from them the risen and soon to be exalted Jesus tells his disciples:

And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Just stay put. The word used in the Greek text is καθίζω, which has connotations of being seated. As I thought about that the first image that came to my mind was that of a dog being trained; being told, 'Sit sit sit come.' Initially I dismissed it as being rather trite. Then the more I thought about it there is something in the attentive passivity of the dog in that picture.

Just go back to Luke's words:

I am sending upon you

Stay here

Until you have been clothed

There is no sense of initiative, no sense of choice, no sense of decision. What we are talking about here is an attentive passivity, a radical openness to God and what he chooses to give. Even in their choosing of a successor to Judas as they waited for the coming of the Spirit there was this openness to God. In the account we have received it came down to a shortlist of two. No talk of further discussions or whatever – they simply cast lots and the lot fell upon Matthias.

This choosing of Matthias is referred to in an episode of ‘Yes, Prime Minister’, that political comedy that was probably uncomfortably near the mark. This particular episode involved the choice of a Bishop for the Church of England, which in England is an appointment made by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister of the day. His aides explain that the appointment of a Bishop, being part of the apostolic succession, cannot be by a squalid process of election – it was a matter of God’s will. So when Judas Iscariot blotted his copy book he had to be replaced. They let the Holy Spirit decide. Hacker naively asked how the Holy Spirit made his views known and was told, by drawing lots. ‘Why don’t we let the Holy Spirit decide this time?’ ‘Prime Minister, no one is confident that the Holy Spirit would understand what makes a good Church of England Bishop’

As with all good humour, the point is made by caricature, by exaggeration but it illustrates the point about that radical openness I was talking about. One of the themes of Ascension is the Lordship, the authority of the risen and ascended Christ. When we are truly waiting upon God in prayer we lay aside our own agendas, our own preferences. Yes when we are offering up our intercessory prayers – prayers for peace, for the Church, for the sick and the suffering – we bring our concerns before God but the outcome is in God’s hands. It used to be said of certain churches in Ballymena that on Sunday morning God received his orders for the coming week. Which begs the question, does it not, do we see prayer in terms of trying to twist God’s arm to make him see things our way? Or is it rather a setting our concerns, our hopes, our plans, our fears within the context of our walk with God, our understanding of God and his purpose for our lives? Our Lord, as he prayed in Gethsemene, poured out his heart, the anguish of what lay before him, he concluded with a prayer of submission, ‘Father let this cup pass from me. Never the less not my will but yours be done.’

Prayer, waiting upon God, waiting upon the Spirit must involve this radical openness to God that I am talking about. When we are truly open to God we can be truly open to one another. Church meetings, be they Select Vestry, School Board of Management, Diocesan

and General Synods, all begin with prayer. I would frequently pray that ‘God may in all things direct and rule our hearts.’ We will come to those meetings with our own preferences, our own ideas but we must also come with hearts and minds open to others and a shared resolve to find a common mind under God as to what is the best course of action to follow.

In the course of our Church 21 meetings, one of the things that came out of the meetings was a recognition of the need for tolerance; tolerance with one another, tolerance with one another’s preferences in the way we worship.

When we are truly open to God we can be truly open to the needs of the other. Truly open to God, we see situations, people, problems through the eyes of God. Seeing through the eyes of God we encounter God in the lonely, the distressed, the awkward, the shy, the difficult. We learn a little of what it means ‘as much as you did it to the least of these you did it to me’; we learn what it is to truly pray that challenging prayer in the Late Evening Office ‘Let us pray for those who hate us as we pray for those who love us.’

In the account of the Ascension and the few days that follow we have a picture of waiting upon God, an openness to receive what the Spirit will impart. This episode reminds me of the need to foster a spirit of waiting, a genuine openness in my own walk with God. An openness that incorporates a readiness to set aside my own preferences and agendas in my service of him who is Lord of the Church, that his name may be glorified and his Kingdom advanced.