

There is a church in the Parish of Ballyrashane in Connor diocese that has an interesting window over the communion table that picks up the theme of the Ascension. It depicts the disciples looking skyward and at the top of the window we just see a pair of feet.

Last Thursday was Ascension Day. In our communion service on Wednesday morning we used the lectionary for Ascension Day. We read as our lessons the accounts given to us in the Acts of the Apostles and St Luke's Gospel of the Ascension. Whenever we say the Creeds in Church in the context of our worship we confess that we believe of Jesus that 'he ascended into heaven'.

We may smile as we think of that window over the communion table in Ballyrashane but what goes through our minds as we say those words, as we hear those accounts? Since the days of Galileo, when we finally let go of the idea that the earth was at the centre of the universe and realised that the earth was but a planet of a small star on the edge of the Milky Way, we have dispensed with the three decker model of the universe with the earth mid way between the heavenly realms and the underworld.

In the course of this we come to realise that Ascension is a far more profound concept than of simple spatial orientation. A book I would often find myself turning to when the Gospel of the day is from St John's Gospel is one by Archbishop William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War until his sudden death in 1944. In the course of a sermon he wrote of the Ascension:

In the days of His earthly ministry, only those could speak to

him who came where He was: if He was in Galilee, men could not find Him in Jerusalem; if He was in Jerusalem, men could not find Him in Galilee. His Ascension means that He is perfectly united with God; we are with Him wherever we are present to God; and that is everywhere and always. Because He is "in Heaven" ***He is everywhere on earth: because He is ascended, He is here now. Our devotion is not to hold us by the empty tomb; it must lift up our hearts to heaven so that we too "in heart and mind thither ascend and with Him continually dwell": it must also send us forth into the world to do His will; and these are not two things, but one.***

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The Ascension is about Christ's presence with us, not limited by time and space but present with us always and everywhere. But the Archbishop does not leave it there; he goes on to talk of our relationship with him and the outworking of that relationship in worship and in service. Of course, relationships is what we were thinking about last Sunday. In this teaching at the Last Supper as presented to us by St John, there are a series of concentric relationships. It all begins with the relationship between Jesus and the Father, presented to us in terms of a mutual indwelling; the Father abiding in Jesus and Jesus abiding in the Father. Flowing out from that is the relationship between Jesus and the disciples, Jesus inviting the disciples to abide in his love just as he abides in them. Then, in our Gospel reading today, as this teaching at the Last Supper draws towards a close, the relationships move further out as Jesus prays:

‘Holy Father, ²⁰I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.’ *John 17:20-21*

Jesus and the Father; Jesus and the disciples; the disciples and the world. Put that together with St Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ last meeting with his disciples and the command:

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." *Matthew 28:19-20*

Jesus is not talking here of an inward looking, inwardly motivated ‘holy huddle’. From the very outset is to be an outward looking group, looking out to the world into which Christ sends it. Going back to the thoughts of Archbishop William Temple, he once remarked: ‘The Church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of non-members.’ It is there to proclaim the Gospel; to speak of justice in the face of injustice, to speak truth to power on behalf of those on the margins of our society.

In this closing prayer at the end of the last supper, Jesus has spoken of unity; the unity of the Father and the Son; the unity of Jesus and the disciples. In this portion we read today, he goes on to speak of unity among those to whom the disciples will proclaim the Gospel:

²⁰I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. It is a unity with a purpose: ‘so that the world may believe that you have sent me. Just as the Church does not exist for its own benefit, so even its unity is

not to serve its own purposes, but that of Christ, the head of the Body that is the Church. Commenting on this passage, Temple wrote:

‘The unity of the Church is something much more than unity of ecclesiastical structure, though it cannot be complete without this. ***It is the love of God in Christ possessing the hearts of men so as to unite them in himself – as the Father and the Son are united in that love of Each for Each which is the Holy Spirit.***

Temple – Readings in St John’s Gospel

As I was remarking last week this is a unity that is true of all levels of Church life, from the Parish to the wider Church. Yesterday in our Fete we had examples of individuals in teams working together on the particular stalls, all coming together in a common purpose. That produced a very satisfactory financial result for us as a Parish. But it did more than that. Talking to visitors it made an impression on those outside of a community working together. That can serve as an illustration of our vocation as a Christian community, committed to one another in love and service. I ask the same question as I asked last week: ‘Do we see ourselves as the Body of Christ or as a group of competing factions?’ The way we answer that question has a huge bearing on Parish life. To use the language of ‘indwelling’ – do we recognise God living and dwelling in one another?

It is out of this sense of unity – unity with Christ and unity with one another – that we come together in worship, not in separate competing factions but as members of one Body. It is out of this unity that we reach out in love and service to one another. In the name of Christ we show to a hurting and divided world the power of love, of service, of reconciliation.