

## Ascension Day

Here is the back of the T-shirt idea: don't rush to Pentecost.

In recent times, it seems to me that, the Feast of the Ascension has been rather absorbed into Pentecost. From Ascension Day onwards, we pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit; hearts and minds focus on being sent and equipped for mission.

This makes some sense. As the Gospel of John tells us repeatedly, the Advocate (the HS) cannot come unless Jesus goes up into glory. The physical Jesus leaves, in order that the Spirit of Christ might be given to all, and we might witness to God's love in the world.

All well and good. But the question I want to wrestle with is this: what are the gifts of the story of the Ascension, as distinct from the story of Pentecost? What matters about *this* part of the story?

Three things for us to consider. The first is this:

If Pentecost is all about the Spirit coming down, Ascension Day is all about us going up. It is not just about the ascension of Christ, but through him, and with him, and by him, the ascension of humanity into the very heart of the Divine Life. Humanity is now caught up in the Divine Dance that gives vitality to all creation. We find this idea at the heart of Paul's letter to the Colossians... 'you are hidden with Christ on high' Paul writes. Or as 1 Peter has it – we are partakers of the divine nature!

Christ does not shed his human nature, but rather takes it up into glory. And in him, we now live at the heart of the Trinity. Abstract irrelevance? Well, no. Certainly, it is a harder concept to get a handle on than the message of Pentecost. But, the idea that we are already hidden with Christ in God in glory, is central to the Christian Gospel.

For, it makes clear that all that needs to be done to reconcile all things and bring them back to their centre and origin in God, has already been done. God has done it all! And so, when we do think about 'going' or 'being sent' we can remember we go as witnesses; we go as observers to something that has already happened. We go simply to tell the good news of what *God has already done in Christ*.

There is no more work to be done! How the church needs to hear that message today. God has already done everything needed to redeem, to reconcile, to heal, to bring all of creation back to Godself. We simply 'point' to God's marvellous work. We are already 'seated with god on high'

That's the first gift of this story.

The second gift is this: it is a story all about waiting.

At the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Augustine of Hippo was busy writing his epic *City of God*. The Barbarians were at the gates of Rome and the mighty Empire was about to crumble. The so-called Dark Ages were about to dawn. As Roman Christendom waned and dusk came over the Imperium a little man named St Benedict began a monastery, out of town, out of sight, on the edge of that shattered world.

He formed a community that watched and waited and prayed. It did not seek a new Christian era, it did not seek to transform society. It simply sought to witness to another way, another reality, another world. They became part of an ancient tradition of those waiting on God.

In Egypt the Israelites waited for 400 years. In the desert they waited for 40 years. In the time of the Kings they waited for peace to come. In exile they waited, put down roots, built houses. In Judea they waited for the liberator to appear. In Jerusalem the disciples 'waited' for the coming Spirit.

And so today, we are called to still wait. Or better perhaps we wait, still. We slow ourselves and still ourselves enough to wait. And here we begin to see this gift is related to the first gift. Waiting is about ceding control. Waiting, by its nature is about someone else's action.

We wait for the bus. We wait for the hospital appointment. We wait for the baby to be born. Waiting, once again, reminds us that the future does not depend on us, life does not revolve around us, and God does not require us to fulfil God's good purposes. Instead, we are a people who are characterised by waiting upon the Lord. We wait on the action of another. We wait on the action of God's very self.

That's the second gift this story gives us.

So, we sit, we wait.

The third gift is this: an empty space.

Christ ascends. We're left with what? Nothing, an absence. God has left. How can this be a gift?

It is a gift because it resonates with how we feel. We cannot see God, or touch God, or smell God. We may know God is here, but often cannot sense his presence. God feels absent. Or again, when we look at the mess of the world, we think, where on earth is God in all this? Why does God not do something about that tyrant? How could God let that natural disaster cause such untold damage?

The story of the Ascension is a story of absence. It allows us to kick and scream and rail against the feeling that God is not here, not acting.

On a deeper level, this absence in the narrative, is what stops us making God into an idol. It stops us making a little god who fits nicely in our pocket, and does what we need when we want him. This absence, this empty space, that the Ascension leaves us with, means God is not the genie whose bottle I rub when I am in need.

Instead, the One and True God sits in judgement over my little idols and petty desires. The story of the Ascension calls us to keep this 'empty space' empty. It forces us to remember that God is not a Big Friendly Object, but the one over us, who judges us, and calls us to repentance. God is not a god in the pocket, but the Almighty, the I AM. God is the one who we cannot control, who is absolute Mystery, who sits above us and calls us to conform ourselves to his Love.

Three special gifts of this Feast, that cannot be absorbed into Pentecost.

The gift of sitting; for we are already seated in glory. The gift of Waiting' for in our waiting we witness to God's Action. The gift of Empty Space; reminding us that God blows our tiny minds and wants to get rid of our little idols.

We sit and wait in the empty space. This is the gift of the story of the Ascension.