

That Liminal Place

BEaster7 – 2024

Acts 1:15-17,21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

This 7th Sunday of Easter is in-between two important days in the Church, feast days we call them:

Ascension - which was Thursday, and which is always 40 days after Easter.

Pentecost – which will be next Sunday, always 50 days after Easter.

Next week, Pentecost Sunday, we will hope to see lots of people wearing red; a fun tradition, as we celebrate God's Holy Spirit, the flame of God's love, which is given to the Church by God.

And since we are the Church of the Holy Spirit,

Pentecost is our special feast day!

The Ascension is when, in scripture, the resurrected Jesus departed from his disciples, and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

Luke, and Acts, are the two books in which Jesus' ascension into heaven is described. And these two, written by the same author, are quite distinct from each other.

In John, the gospel we are in today, the risen Jesus is on the seashore with a charcoal fire lit. When his disciples see him in the early morning and come in from their boats, he tells them to bring him some of the fish they have caught through the night. Then, about as down to earth as he can be, he invites them to “come and have breakfast.” And the gospel closes with Jesus telling Peter, “If you love me, feed my sheep.” His very last instruction in the gospel of John: Follow me. And no mention of how he departs.

It may not be what Jesus envisioned of his followers, but, all through the New Testament the resurrected Jesus is in heaven, exalted, glorified, enthroned.

But what else, in their understanding of the way things are, were they to do with this man who had revealed God in so many ways? Not just in what he did, but more so, in who he was? Jesus had merged with God in their devotion. If their experience was that he was one with God, not separate in any way, how could God be worshipped aside from Jesus? So, they put him up high, where, in their cosmology, God dwelt, and alongside God, they worshipped him.

And a new religion began to take shape.

Richard Halverson, presbyterian pastor, and chaplain to the US Senate

He once said:

Christianity begins on Palestinian soil as a relationship with a person.

It moves onto Greek soil and becomes a philosophy.

It moves onto Roman soil and becomes an institution.

It moves onto British soil and becomes a culture.

It moves onto American soil and becomes an enterprise.

I confess, back to Jesus being both human and divine,

the two are one in my mind and in my prayer life.

Jesus walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own,

and the joy we share...

And at the same time, I bow at the name of Jesus.

I can do this not because of Jesus' ascent, but rather, because of his descent.

Poet Malcolm Guite expresses it this way in two stanzas of his poem, *Descent*:

They sought to soar into the skies,

Those classic gods of high renown,

For lofty pride aspires to rise,

But you came down.

You dropped down from the mountains sheer,

Forsook the eagle for the dove,

The other gods demanded fear,

But you gave love.

And so, however Jesus departed, and whichever way he went,

wherever we might rationalize that he is,

when we lift up our hearts, when we lift them to God,

Jesus is present in our midst.

Today's gospel from John is part of a long final prayer

that Jesus prays as his embodied time on earth is coming to a close.

This prayer anticipates his departing from those he is closest to.

This prayer and the gospel scenes of his departing

all trying to express a huge transition in his life and theirs;

from breaking bread and broiling fish together,

to a complex world religion.

Whatever our belief about the Ascension,
theologians offer that it holds the quality of liminality.
Liminality – that two-way threshold that allows us to move back and forth
from one experience of reality into another.

The coastal marshes are a liminal place;
that brackish place where fresh water and salt water meet,
that primal muckity-muck, that lies under the sawgrass,
where new life is teeming.

The door to your home, where you go back and forth
between your public life and your private life.

The dirt road that took you through the gates each summer
to the camp where you went as a child.
And when you return as an adult,
when you drive through those gates,
time and space are changed.

Liminal places have no permanent barriers.
They are permeable places, where there is always a freedom of passage of sorts.
And as we move through transitions in life
God is present on both sides of the threshold.

As Jesus knew he was leaving this world, his prayer strains to express his love and care
for those who would no longer see him, but with whom he would always be near.

Those to whom we are bound in love,
even if they no longer live near us, even if there is estrangement,
and even after they have left this world, they are ever present to us and we to them.

When we pass through these liminal places in life,
as Jesus was preparing to depart from this life,
there is still that ache – we hear it in his voice; we feel it in our hearts -
that such a change, even though liminal, will be hard to bear.
And there is a fear that a door will close,
and that a final and complete separation will be inevitable.

Moving back to Jesus' final prayer in John's gospel -
A summary of this section of the prayer Jesus is praying,
gives us Jesus' understanding of himself,
what of God's gifts and words he has shared with the disciples,
what of himself he has shared with them
and his pleas for their protection so that their unity in him will not be disrupted

and finally that the gift of joy will be complete in them.

The prayer is filled with repetitious phrases that seem redundant – Words about the world, about what is given, about protection, about truth, about sanctification.

In closing, let us glean three of these words:

Word.

God's words are given by God to Jesus
who gives God's words to his disciples,
who have received them and kept them.
We know Jesus is the word of God. Scripture is the word of God.
Words to read, hear, mark, and inwardly digest.
Words to parse and understand.
But what about this?
To give someone your word is to give them your truth, your promise.
What is given by God through Jesus is God's truth.

World.

The disciples are in the world. Jesus is going out of the world.
They don't belong to the world but are to remain in the world –
This gives a feeling of separation, of impending sadness and grief.
But in all this coming and going in and out of the world
they are given an abiding connection to him -
a promise that life in Christ is an ongoing liminal place for us,
a threshold between heaven and earth.

Sanctify

Jesus asks God to sanctify the disciples in the truth.
Jesus sanctifies himself so they may be sanctified in truth.

To sanctify, to hallow, to make holy,
is to be given to your true purpose.

What makes someone, something holy?

It is living your purpose in life. There is holiness in that.
A chalice is sanctified, set apart,
to hold and impart the living presence of Christ in a community of faith.
Our sanctuary is set aside as the place where the gifts of our lives
And the gift of God's Word, God's truth, are joined.
Motherhood is hallowed, set apart, for the nurture and growing and loving children.
Each disciple of Jesus is sanctified, set apart, to be in the world yet not of the world,
to be a liminal place in this world where God's word, God's truth may be met.

Think of it – as disciples of Jesus, we are sanctified to *be* liminal places;
To be like a chalice in which wine is changed to the lifeblood of Jesus present;
To be that still place, that brackish place where earth and heaven meet
and the world is teeming with new life.