

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 16 May 2021 | The Seventh Sunday of Easter

TODAY'S READINGS

Ezekiel 36.24-28 | Psalm 1 | Acts 1.15-17,21-26 | John 17.6-19



'The Ascension of Christ'
by Giotto (c.1267-1337)

‡ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus said, *'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth'*.

On Wednesday morning from the despatch box of the House of Commons, the Prime Minister announced the setting up of an independent public inquiry into the handling of the Coronavirus pandemic. Although the proposed timing of this anticipated review came under intense scrutiny, especially since it won't take place until the spring of next year; we were assured that the government was "fully committed to learning the lessons at every stage of this crisis". The stated initial aims of the investigation to place "the state's actions under the microscope" so as to "identify the key issues that will make a difference for the future". In short, like the other public inquiries of recent years relating to the Hillsborough disaster, the events of 'Bloody Sunday' in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom's role in the Iraq war, the inquiry will be concerned with a search for the truth. In the hope that by learning the honest reality of how things were and are, past mistakes can be examined and measures put into place to ensure that any failures of leadership and governance, even in the midst of unprecedented challenge, aren't repeated.

Yet, though there is a great deal of appeal in seeking after the truth - especially when reflecting on the near universal impact and challenges presented by this time of pandemic - the results of such a search are rarely comfortable to hear. We know this of course from our personal experiences, when it can be quite difficult when those around us direct us to something about ourselves that we don't particularly like to recognise and would prefer to ignore. If you're anything like me then whilst being quite agreeable in noticing my own mistakes and failures, I have a tendency to react rather abruptly and defensively when someone else picks me up on those times when I might have fallen short. The truth convicts us and disrupts us, diverting our normal patterns and routines and directing us to consider things that might be different. Therefore, its predictable we're not always going to enjoy being confronted with the truth about ourselves or indeed how we've missed the mark in our dealings with others.

In the various accounts of Jesus' encounters and actions following his resurrection we find that all the gospel writers are concerned in revealing to us what it might mean to believe the truth of Easter. The realisation of Mary Magdalene in the garden after presuming Jesus to be the gardner; the transformation of Thomas' fearful doubts into searching and secure faith as he stands before the risen Lord; the rehabilitation of Peter by the Sea of Galilee following the dark night of betrayal as he's told to

tend and feed Jesus' sheep; the cowering disciples in the upper room who through the gift of Christ's peace are given boldness for what will soon be expected of them. Only by recognising the truth of who Jesus is, what God has done in and through him, can everything else come together and our lives, however mixed up and confused, find their meaning and orientation.

In these days of Ascensiontide such hope is renewed in remembering that the same Jesus who suffered death on the cross and who was raised to new life on the third day, is the same Jesus, who in the words of today's collect, was exalted in great triumph to God's kingdom in heaven. Risen, ascended, glorified. The writings of the New Testament reminding us, just as the Church has proclaimed down the centuries, that what we know and experience of Christ cannot be constrained by the usual parameters of space and time.

For, if Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, then just he was with his apostles two thousand years ago, so he is with us now, relevant to all aspects of human life. The ascension bringing with it the sure reminder that the events of Jesus life, death and resurrection were neither historical accident or a nice memory, but the very ground of the world's hope and salvation, holding out a truth that will stand for all time and into eternity. As Rowan Williams remarks, 'Jesus' departure is not so much the conclusion of a sequence of resurrection appearances as the first movement in the creation of a worldwide mission and witness by the Church in the power of the promised Spirit.'

It is this need to prepare his disciples for what is soon to take place that forms the focus for today's passage from John's gospel. Where in concluding the so-called farewell discourse, anticipating the coming hours of his passion, Jesus prays to his Father for his disciples. Asking that they might be both enabled and prepared for all that will be asked of them, as those called to share and participate fully in the mission he has begun. It is a prayer which when read in its entirety communicates to us, just as it would have done for those for whom the gospel of John was written for all those centuries ago, what God's revelation of himself in Jesus was all about and perhaps more importantly what this meant for how they were now to live as citizens of Christ's kingdom in the world.

Jesus prays, *'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth'*.

As those who have encountered the fullness of God manifested in this Jesus from Nazareth, the one who the gospel writer tells us from the beginning is the Word made flesh, *'full of grace and truth'*; Jesus asks that the disciples might be sanctified in *'the truth'*. The word translated to us as *'sanctify'* could also

be interpreted as *'consecrate'*. Jesus praying to the Father, that those whom he calls friends might be hallowed and set apart in *'the truth'*. The truth that arises, not from within ourselves, from how we might wish or want things to be, but rather in quoting Psalm 119, a truth that finds its origin in the promises of God's word: *'your word'* Jesus says, *'is truth'*.

And thus it is an awareness of this *'truth'* that is to animate each and every part of our lives. As those who've been entrusted with ensuring that the truth about God is made known, both through our relationship with Christ and our interactions with each other. If we are consecrated in the truth, they we're not only summoned to be truthful, but to be agents of God's loving and wondrous truth in the world. A truth that is gracious and generous, not recriminating and judgemental. A truth that confirms us in all that the Lord has done for us and ultimately reminds us that it is God's Kingdom we seek and not our own. As Jesus says earlier in the gospel, *'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'*

Whilst many forces in society, politics and culture can encourage us to hide away from the truth and to avoid the challenge that comes from our choices. Jesus confronts us clearly and markedly with what it might mean for us to live obediently and responsibly in relationship to the one in whom we live and move and have our being. It is the truth of God in Christ that frames our past, present and future, that saves us from ourselves, that raises us to the very heights of heaven, and that directs us to what it might mean to be drawn, so as to draw others, into the community of God's grace and peace. As the Jesuit priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, inspired by the words of Thomas Aquinas, once wrote: *'What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do; Truth Himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.'*

✠ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

<https://www.youtube.com/thechurchofengland>



The Church of England online weekly service for The Seventh Sunday of Easter can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MdSCETqI_A

The Collect
for The Seventh Sunday of Easter

**O God the King of glory,
you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ
with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven:
we beseech you, leave us not comfortless,
but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us
and exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.**

Old Testament Reading

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Ezekiel 36.24-28

New Testament Reading

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, 'Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus — for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.' So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.' So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Acts 1.15-17,21-26

Gospel Reading

Jesus said to his disciples, 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

John 17.6-19

'Ascension Day'

by Malcolm Guite

from 'Sounding the Seasons' (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012)

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory
 Whilst we were rooted still in time and place
 As earth became a part of Heaven's story
 And heaven opened to his human face.
We saw him go and yet we were not parted
 He took us with him to the heart of things
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted
 Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,
 Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,
 Whilst we our selves become his clouds of witness
 And sing the waning darkness into light,
 His light in us, and ours in him concealed,
 Which all creation waits to see revealed .

Prayers of Intercession

during Ascensiontide

Let us join our prayers with those of our Saviour Christ,
seeking the Father's blessing and the gifts of the Spirit.

Jesus Christ, great high priest,
living for ever to intercede for us,
pray for the Church, your broken body in the world.
Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ, king of righteousness,
enthroned at the right hand of the majesty on high,
pray for the world, and make it subject to your gentle rule.
Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ, Son of Man,
drawing humanity into the life of God,
pray for your brothers and sisters in need, distress or sorrow.
Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ, pioneer of our salvation,
bringing us to glory through your death and resurrection,
surround with your saints and angels
those who have died trusting your promises ...
Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ, Lord over all things,
ascended far above the heavens and filling the universe,
pray for us who receive the gifts you give us for work in your service.
Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ,
keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit
and in the bond of peace,
and bring the whole created order to worship at your feet;
for you are alive and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.