

# SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 24 May 2020 | The Seventh Sunday of Easter

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## TODAY'S READINGS

Acts 1.6-14 | Psalm 68.1-10, 32-end | | Peter 4.12-14, 5.6-11 | | John 17.1-11

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**Alleluia! Christ is risen!  
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

'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.'

John 17.11



*Icon of The Ascension of Jesus  
c.1408, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow  
by Andrei Rublev (c.1360s-1430)*

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

If there is one thing that I've found myself reflecting upon and talking to others about in recent days, it's our ability as individuals and as communities to practice the virtue of patience. If you are anything like me, being deprived of knowing or doing something can be quite hard to deal with, particularly if you're prone to fearfulness and anxiety. Waiting for things, can for some, bring with it a sense of worry, feelings of trepidation about what the future will hold and what it might look like, especially when what demands our patience is seemingly out of our control or influence.

We are all, I imagine, sharing such similar feelings at the moment as in the midst of lockdown and continued physical distancing from loved ones, friends and neighbours we share in being removed from those activities, people and tasks that we would otherwise be doing. Together we have been united in sharing feelings of both loss and deprivation, however seemingly small or great they have been to us personally; emotions that of course have been heightened by the grief, pain and discomfort that we know so many families and homes have faced so acutely. All of this reinforces our need for God's gift of patience, to be humble before him, so as to be enabled to cast all our anxieties upon him in the knowledge that he cares for us.<sup>1</sup>

There is a certain appropriateness then that our word 'patience' has its roots in the Latin word for suffering, a way of life, often under-appreciated, that speaks of willingness to face adversities in a spirit of hopeful assurance. This as St Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans is a hope in what cannot, for the moment at least, be seen - meaning we must wait for it with patience.<sup>2</sup> It demands prayerful attention and consideration not by glibly asserting that somehow better days will come with a blind optimism, but rather having real hope in those things that endure, which for us as people of faith means anchoring our hope surely and certainly in the person of Jesus Christ.

It is for this reason that Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, remarks that as the body of Christ, the Church needs to be marked by a 'profound patience'; since 'only a Church that is learning patience can learn to proclaim hope effectively'.<sup>3</sup> Such a patience is marked by a realisation that things as they are now are not as they should be, and that somehow with God's help the future will be different. A hopeful future that will require our prayerful participation in order to ensure that we don't simply slide back into so-called 'normality', but see the arrival of better days for all, particularly the once under-valued and under-appreciated in the weeks, months and years to come.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 4.7

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8.25

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples*, London: SPCK, 2016, p 30.

In Ascensiontide, this brief time between our celebrations of Jesus being taken back up into heaven and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the need for patience is mandated as we remember how the earliest followers of Christ prayerfully waited upon God. Since his resurrection Jesus had told his followers not to hold on to him as he was going to ascend to the Father, that physically he was not to remain with them forever, and yet would still be with them; that he would remain and continue to be alongside them for all time. The Ascension marks then a point of departure, the end of Jesus' earthly ministry and the invitation to wait in hope for what had been promised for the future, the gift that we celebrate at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit would be poured out abundantly. It was something that had to be waited for though, with patience and with prayerful longing; in hope that all that Jesus had promised would come to pass, that despite the sorrow of parting he would abide with them forevermore.

All of this, as we read in our gospel reading, Jesus had foretold on the night before his passion; in teaching his disciples what would come to pass through his impending death and resurrection. A discourse that ends with the prayer that Jesus offers to God, commending his disciples and all that they will do to his Father's care and protection, looking ahead to the time when he will no longer be with 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.'*<sup>4</sup>

There is in these words of Jesus yet another call for patient endurance, that somehow his friends will need help, guidance and support if they are to continue the mission which he has begun. Jesus looks ahead to the time, after the shame of the cross and his victory over the grave, when he will no longer be with the disciples and so offers their future ministry to God as the means by which the world, through them, will come to believe. If Jesus had uniquely revealed the Father's glory on earth then the disciples will continue to reflect this glory through their part in continuing the mission that he has begun, by which all might come to know the God who offers eternal life to all who seek, struggle and yearn to believe.

These flawed disciples were to be instrumental in ensuring that the gospel of love, animated by the life-giving Spirit of Pentecost, would be taken out into all the world. Jesus prays for them knowing that in time they will need God's grace and mercy in order to accomplish all that will be asked of them, just as Jesus continues to pray for his church today; asking that each of us in our fear and unpreparedness might be the means by which he continues to bless the world.

At the moment we are all waiting to see how things will change and adapt in the coming weeks, what the latest government guidance will mean as we transition and prepare for a future that

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<sup>4</sup> John 17.11

seems increasingly uncertain and unlike anything that we might imagine. Some will be impatient for things to get back to normal, others anxious that it will all happen too quickly and might bring further damage to lives and livelihoods. In a way, none of us know what is coming, not least because recent months have changed the world in ways we could never have expected. Just as none of us can foretell what our future lives will be like, even though we trust that by God's grace our present anxieties will cease, troubles will end and in time all manner of things shall be well.

All of this requires patience, a willingness to wait upon the Lord so that our strength will be renewed and our lives filled one more with the gifts of the Spirit. Yet this is not a passive patience which gives way to further worry and alarm but rather an active patience in which we believe and understand God to be at work. He is not absent from our struggles or our sighings, our troubles or torments, but rather yearns for us to be renewed in the truth that he is always at work, persistently faithful, continually loving, enduringly hopeful. By knowing this we can locate our patience - our waiting, our longing, our forbearing, with a perspective that promises something better on the horizon, offered as both a gift for our good and an invitation for our flourishing.

The days that lie ahead can indeed be better than the ones that have gone before, as we learn to value what matters most about our relationships, our society, our church, our environment and our world. Will we have the courage to patiently work for a day when the triumph of greed, injustice, exploitation and a quest for profit, might be replaced with the ideals of fairness, righteousness, justice and kindness which Jesus told us are the foundations of his kingdom? Will we play our part in ensuring that all in our communities are respected and valued, especially those whom so often the world forgets? Using the faith we have received to re-shape what we do out of love for God and our neighbours?

It was for tasks such as these that Jesus prayed for his disciples, so that knowing the eternal life he promised, they might follow the example he had established. In the days between Ascension and Pentecost they in turn prayed with patience for the strength, the will and the means to do all this; as we in turn await the reassuring promise of the Holy Spirit, will we do likewise?

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

## **Ascension<sup>5</sup>**

*by Malcom Guite*

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 .

### **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.

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons: Poetry for the Christian Year* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012).

## Gospel Reading

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

'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.

*John 17.1-11*

## Some Questions to Ponder

1. Why don't you try making a list of those situations in which we need to pray for God's transformation?
2. Is there anything that you are impatient for? Spend some time offering it to God, praying for his guidance and strength.
3. How might you bless a loved one, friend or neighbour in a new surprising way this week?

## Prayers of Intercession

*You might like to particularly remember in your prayers this week:*

- ▶ for the whole Church as we pray *'Thy Kingdom Come'* - that we may be alert to the signs of Christ's presence in the world;
- ▶ for those who are isolated, alone or afraid that they may not know the consolation of the Holy Spirit;
- ▶ for those struggling to find hope, that they may know the abiding gift of the Spirit;
- ▶ for all those called to make decisions on behalf of others, especially as we look to the future, particularly those seeking to make preparations following the updated government guidelines;
- ▶ for those supporting the life of our country at this time and for those who feel undervalued and disregarded, that they might know encouragement;
- ▶ for all who are sick or suffering, particularly those suffering from COVID-19 around the world, that Christ might give bring healing in body, mind and spirit;
- ▶ for those who have died in recent weeks, and all who mourn and grieve the loss of loved ones, may we find hope together in the promise of the resurrection;
- ▶ for fresh glimpses of God's grace in our lives.

*'Jesu, our only joy be thou,  
as thou prize wilt be;  
in thee be all our glory now  
and through eternity.*

*All praise to thee who art gone up  
triumphantly to heaven;  
all praise to God the Father's name,  
and Holy Ghost be given.'*

*This comes with every good wish and prayer for you all this Eastertide,  
may you, and those you love, know God's richest blessing.*

*Yours in the risen Lord,*

