

“The Always Present Spirit”

(Acts 1.6-14)

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Introduction

It’s (almost) the last Sunday of Easter...¹ For seven weeks we’ve been talking about the Risen Christ... but next week we ‘move on’ and focus on the Holy Spirit. The interaction, between us and ‘God as Spirit’, will form the heart of our conversation for many weeks to come. And today, it’s this strange story of *The Ascension* that forms the bridge.

Presence, Not Absence

“As they were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

When it comes to the Ascension, the Sunday School art of our childhood probably doesn’t help us. Do you remember those pictures of Jesus rocketing serenely in a vertical lift-off... up, up and away into the clouds? (*My favourites were the unintentionally comic ones, where all you could see of the disappearing Jesus were his feet sticking out of the clouds.*) This ‘picture-book’ image, combined with our old notion of heaven being a place ‘somewhere above the clouds’, encouraged the idea that Jesus was leaving us, in order to take up residence in another realm.

So if we approach the story of Christ’s ascension carelessly or uncritically, we *could* fall into the trap of seeing it as a story of *departure*... reading it through the prism of one of those high intensity airport scenes, where someone is being farewelled to a foreign land, ‘never to return.’ And although it may have *felt* like that for the disciples, it is not how the faith *sees* or *understands* this event. The tradition says that Christ Jesus ascends, in order to be *more powerfully present* to all humanity than ever before.

¹ Easter 7 ‘looks’ and often feels like the last Sunday... but actually Pentecost Sunday is the day that ‘concludes’ the Easter season.

In the Ascension, Christ moves beyond the constraints of time and space as we know them, where a person is located in one place in one moment (and thus only present to the people who also share that same space and time), to being *present* to all people, in all places, at all times. Christ has broken all boundaries and become *omnipresent*. As the tradition puts it... “*Now instead of occupying one place in the universe, the universe occupies one place in Christ.*” So the Church tells this story to say that Christ is *more powerfully and truly present* than ever before... and all people in all places and all times can access relationship with him. *That’s the church’s story in the Ascension!*

Out of Our Control

Well this sounds lovely and it is indeed so... but of course those watching-disciples would have experienced the event as bewildering and intensely disturbing. Because it is a huge shift for them... They are used to that usual one-to-one relating with Jesus that defines ordinary human relationship. They had known the gift of Christ’s primary attention on them and their little group. And even though he was the master and they were the disciples, there’s something ‘under control’ about that situation. It was a relationship where they could decide when and where it began and ended... how far it could be taken... what its limits were. Even as disciples they still had the option of saying “I’ve had enough today”... or “I’m going to tune out now”... or even, “I’ve had enough of this; I’m going back to fishing.” Because that’s the way human relationships are – they have their boundaries, which even the ‘junior partner’ can exercise. Like here and now... I have the privilege of being the one speaking (indeed with church-given authority, no less), but *you* can tune out any time you choose. You can very effectively choose to *absent* yourself from me, by either literally or metaphorically, turning off your hearing aids... or simply thinking about something else.

But the Ascended Christ is now ‘out of our control’. What the faith says, is that we are now enveloped in his universal presence... whether we recognise it or not. We are always with him, whether we want to be or not. The ascended Christ is unable to be switched off. We may try and ignore him or drown him out, but nevertheless he is always present.

Here’s a way to explore this shift in reality... I meet a woman in the street, exchange pleasant conversation, and think ‘what a lovely person’ as they walk away... and that’s that. At that point it’s a relationship that I can switch on and off – I would only think of her if we met again... only when she was standing there in front of me. But fate conspires that we keep meeting... and then all of a

sudden, I fall in love... Now her presence invades every moment of every day... even when I'm sleeping... regardless of whether I actually see her or not. I try to dismiss her from my mind, but it's no good – she keeps coming back into my consciousness, impinging on everything I try to do. Well that's *sort* of what it's like with the Ascended Christ – he can't be turned off.

Presence

The Ascension story then is not about *departure*... not about *absence*... It's about *presence*!

Way, way before I had any Sunday School teaching or any belief-words to explain the experience, I *felt* the presence of God... all around me like a very big friend. A presence that surrounded me... something bigger and more wonderful... like an ocean that I floated in. That experience *is* our human reality... and as a child I knew it! Of course, I grew up and learned how to 'box' it in with all sorts of prejudices... and how to 'tame' it with fear and anxiety... But I've never ever been able to turn it off completely... and as I age... I find this divine presence flowing back-in... like the tide. It's nothing new, but rather me waking-up to the reality that always been there.

I wonder how you'd describe your experience of God? In what way would you say God is present to you? We're all very different... but this universal presence of Christ is universal reality... and so all that differs is how we perceive it.

Regardless of how our past has been, *now* is the time to wake up and pay attention... When we're young we always want to control God in order to try and manipulate Him to do our bidding. We spend many years thinking we can have faith on our terms. But now we know all of that is nonsense. Now as we live these final chapters of our life journey, we can relax and stop the pretending... and we can sink into the ocean of God's presence.

In the Ascension, the God who we want to contain and control, slips from our grasp... and instead of the old limited relationship of our past, God invites us to enter into the much bigger room of *presence*. Jesus disappears from the clutches of his disciples, promising them that 'something' much much bigger is coming. It's presence... universal presence... Christ with us all the time, whether we choose to recognise it or not.

Conclusion

Can you hear how the story has moved on? Now we're talking about God as Holy Spirit... (And just in time, because next week's Pentecost!)

Jesus said to the 'Woman at the Well', *"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."* (John 4.24) Here's how Eugene Peterson translates it... *"God is sheer being itself – Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirit... their true selves..."*

That's what we're exploring next!

ⁱ Nathan Nettleton