

So it is the first Sunday after Ascension Day, when Christ took his bodily leave of his disciples and, according to Luke's account in the Book of Acts, the disciples were left staring up into the sky, bewildered. And whatever else the Ascension of Christ signifies, it has to do with taking leave, with departure, with loss. Christ will no longer be present to his disciples as they have grown accustomed to him – they must learn to live with his absence. He is gone from them.

Of course, I know that is not the whole story. I know that the ascension of Christ is but the necessary pre-condition for the coming of the Spirit, and when the Spirit comes Christ will be present to his disciples with a greater immediacy, a greater intimacy a greater intensity than ever before. As he said to them, 'I will not leave you bereft; I am coming back to you.' And so the Ascension of Christ is followed by Pentecost when he does indeed come back to them in the surging, renewing power of the Spirit. And yet the dynamic between Christ's Ascension and the Day of Pentecost still signifies the tension between Christ's absence and his presence, his distance from us and his nearness to us, and that is a tension that we live with and struggle with as Christians. And tonight, on this Sunday, caught between Ascension Day and Pentecost, when Christ has departed from us in the body and not yet returned in the Spirit, we are like the disciples staring up into the sky, feeling bereft. And it is an occasion therefore for focusing on Christ's distance from us, his absence.

I wonder where you most feel the absence of Christ? It may of course be in some personal experience of pain or tragedy where you find yourself asking, 'Jesus, where are you?' Or you may feel that absence not in your own life but in the life of the world. After all, David, in his last, dying words that we read from 2 Samuel 23, speaks of himself as God's own king 'who rules people in justice'. And if Christ's ascension is his coronation as God's own king and Lord of all, we might ask, looking at our world, where is this rule of justice? Looking at a world caught in the grip of forces of death and destruction it is easy to conclude that the ascended Christ is more absent than present, more distant than near. No matter how much we trumpet the coming of the Spirit of Pentecost who comes to renew the face of the earth, still Christ's rule seems as far off and distant as heaven is high above us.

Of course, as the church we feel Christ's absence particularly sharply. For us Christ's departure is felt in the slow, painful, decline of Christ's Church and the demise of the Christian faith, at least in this part of the world. Pentecost may mark the explosive birth of the church, and the coming of the Holy Spirit of God may signify renewal and revival and new life, but we don't see too much of that here. Here it seems to be Christ's departure that we are witnessing. For some that is something to be welcomed, a cause for much rejoicing. For some the disappearance of Christ before the disciples' eyes is a metaphor for the end of our enthrallment to superstition and mythology. For some the only ascension that matters is our ascension, humanity's rising to rule the world without recourse to gods and religion. Here ascension means our ascension finally to an adult and mature responsibility for our lives without the false comfort of faith. Here ascension signifies an uprising, an overthrowing of an ancient, tyrannical deity that has held us a captive. And it is therefore an ascension into freedom and enlightenment. This ascension is not Christ's taking leave of us but our taking leave of Christ and every other divinity, and about time too.

So we find ourselves wondering about the future of the church. Are we in the secular, post-Christian West done with Pentecost? Are we stuck with the disciples, staring up into the sky but, unlike them, knowing only the departure of Christ with no hope of the coming of the Spirit of new life?

Well, let's turn to our reading from Ephesians. Whatever else may be the purpose of this letter it seems clear that Paul is writing to reassure and to encourage the Christians at Ephesus. Maybe they too were feeling vulnerable. Maybe they were questioning their future. And maybe

that is why Paul goes to such lengths to speak of the vast resources of God's power open to us who have faith. This is the power that was seen at work when God raised Christ from the dead and enthroned him at his right hand. This is the power that raised Christ far above all principalities and powers and dominions and authorities.

And it is wonderful and reassuring that these verses resound with the language of power, but it is precisely that power that seems so absent from the church here today. There is a big, big discrepancy between this vision of the exalted Christ and the reality of the humbled Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century West. It is hard to connect this ascended Christ with the church as we know it.

But here we need to hear something else that Paul says. In the last words of our reading Paul speaks of the church as 'Christ's body, the fullness of him who fills all'. Now, what on earth does that mean, 'the fullness of him who fills all'. Well, there is much debate and disagreement, but being a Reformed preacher you might expect me to go with the interpretation of the great Genevan Reformer John Calvin. Just listen to what Calvin has to say about Christ's fullness, and I quote:

'By this word "fullness" (Paul) means that our Lord Jesus Christ and even God his Father account themselves imperfect, unless we are joined to him... as if a father should say, My house seems empty to me when I do not see my child in it. A husband will say, I seem to be only half a man when my wife is not with me. After the same manner God says that he does not consider himself full and perfect, except by gathering us to himself and making us all one with him.'

Now, that is the language not of power but of love, indeed it is something of a contrast to the language of power. This supreme, all-powerful ascended Christ, risen above every dominion and authority would only be incomplete without his church. We are his fullness and without us he would be lacking.

And that is the real good news for the church of Christ's Ascension. Not that we are a power, exalted over other powers as we once were. But that we are loved, and Christ will not be without us. However much he may seem absent from us we will always be present to him, and in that assurance lies our future. Amen.