

Easter 7 2020

If ever there was a festival that speaks to the heart of our current lived experience it was the one we celebrated on Thursday and remember in our readings today. In case you missed it (and it's pretty easy to miss not having any cards or presents or chocolate attached to it) it was the Feast of the Ascension. The day when we remember Jesus withdrawing his physical presence from his friends and from the world in general. Sound sort of familiar? No more face to face talks, no more sharing of bread and fish with friends, no more wandering through towns and villages. A real withdrawal

There's a Facebook joke going the rounds that calls the ascension the beginning of Jesus working from home. But that image is I think deeply wrong. Jesus' home isn't away from us in heaven – it's here with us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Not in some form of spiritual zoom link but a living divine presence of God that is never socially distanced or unavailable to us. To me the ascension is not about Jesus leaving the world and going home to heaven but about something far theologically richer and stranger. It is about humanity going home to God.

Most of the time our Christian focus is on how Christ transforms us – how God chose to sanctify our bodily reality by becoming flesh like us; how in Jesus we see a new openness of loving, forgiving being; how through death and resurrection Jesus broke chains of violence and death to offer us new life and freedom. But the ascension offers us a new perspective - that it is not only we who are changed by Christ's loving presence among us. God is also changed. The passionate intimate relationship that Christ formed with humanity works its transformative power both ways – on God as well as on us.

For Christ doesn't return to God unchanged. Jesus does not shed his bodily existence and leave it behind but takes it with him into the heart of God. All the resurrection stories tell us

of Jesus' continued embodiment – the food he shares on the beach, the scars that Thomas hardly dares to touch. His body is part of who he is. It is not abandoned and left behind but transformed to become part of who God is.

So as a result of the ascension, right at the heart of God, is our humanity. Right at the heart of who God is there is the experience of death, of suffering, of laughter, of embracing friends, of loneliness, of sleepless nights, of shared jokes around a table, of tears, of regret, and of hope. All the chaotic loveliness and pain of human life is not shrugged off and discarded but brought into the heart of God's being. God is different because God became human and never left that humanity behind.

In fact, the ascension is the first step in the completion of what began with the incarnation. God became human to show us how to be human and to show us the invincible strength of God's love for us. But there is more, wonderfully more! God became human to make us one with God. As Jesus says slightly later in this chapter of John's gospel: 'As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us.' This is our eternal destiny, to be not only saved but to become one with the God who saved us.

This is pretty mind blowing. Really, think about it. You who, like me, have failed at so many things. You who, like me, have snapped at your partners or children or friends. You who, like me, have stood to one side while we see others suffer. We are the ones God chooses to bring into the divine being, who God chooses as dance partners for the music of eternity. For those of us sick of seeing our own face gazing back at us from our computer screens, remember how beloved that face is to God.

The second step in the completion of the incarnation is the one we celebrate next week – Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. As I said, this is not some spiritual zoom connection to make up for the fact that we can no longer

meet Jesus face to face. The Holy Spirit is the transformed life of God in the heart of all that is. The Holy Spirit is the point of connection that holds us together as a community of faith even when we are physically separate. The Holy Spirit's presence in, between and around us means that God is still in the heart of our human experience, just as our human experience is in the heart of God.

The ascension can easily feel like a festival of withdrawal, of absence. Of God finished with the incarnation returning to the state God was before – more remote from this world, more detached from our concerns, more absent than present. A God choosing to work from home. But this is actually the reverse of what is happening. God is allowing our experience into the heart of who God is, God is welcoming humanity into the dance of divinity, God is receiving us in Christ and allowing Godself to change. God is letting the loving, intimate relationship established in Christ transform divinity as well as humanity.

As we look to a God who allowed us into the very heart of who God is, allow that same God into the very heart of who you are. Know your value, your infinite worth. Know your connection to all those God loves. Know your connection to the divine dance of life. Allow yourself to rest this week safe in those sheltering arms. Allow yourself to dance this week as if only God is watching. Allow yourself to be this week who you truly are – a sibling of Christ, a child of the divine, a holy temple of the Holy Spirit.

And know that if Christ *is* working from home it is because Christ is here working in us, dwelling with us whose humanity ascended with him to heaven.