

The sky's the limit!

Today is indeed the seventh Sunday of Easter, the Sunday before the Feast of Pentecost; and it is also the Sunday after the Feast of the Ascension, which was last Thursday, forty days after Easter, and ten days before Pentecost, which occurs fifty days after Easter. With so much going on, it would be quite easy just to glide right by Thursday's excitement without a pause. After all, what was that all about: Jesus disappearing upwards into a cloud?

It has certainly been a wild ride for Jesus' followers with the acceleration of events leading to Jesus' crucifixion, followed by his startling resurrection and frequent presence over the last forty days. Who can blame them for asking, "Is it now, Lord? Is it now that the kingdom of Israel is to be restored to us?"

Whatever their understanding of Jesus is, they do believe he is the Messiah, and what they want him to do is restore the Kingdom of Israel to the Jewish people. Yes, they understand that he is Redeemer and Savior, but they have a particular job for him to do in a particular place.

But anyway, that doesn't seem likely to happen now. They are going to have to wait, and, more than that, they are going to have to stop looking up into the sky. As the men in white tell them: there is little point in doing that. Now is the time to go back to Jerusalem – and wait.

I wonder what they talked about as they walked back to the city of Jerusalem? Maybe they walked in silence. Maybe they were all talking together. Maybe together they were at last putting the pieces together. However they did it, they did finally make that immense leap from seeing themselves as disciples, to imagining themselves as apostles, witnesses to this new gospel. No longer to be merely onlookers, followers; now, with the power of the Holy Spirit, they are to become the vanguard of God's continued creation of kingdom of heaven, on earth.

When they got back to the city, they returned to the upper room where they had been staying. And they, with Jesus' mother Mary, and his brothers, "constantly devoted themselves to prayer".

The hour has come. The hour has come when Jesus will be glorified not just for the acts of power that he has accomplished during his life, not just because in his death and rising, he defeated death itself, but now because those whom he loved and worked with will be filled with a glorious knowledge that can only have come from God.

His work in human form is now done, and done in a way that was not completed until now. Now is the time that Jesus can leave his very specific and particular life in Galilee, for the cosmic. In his larger, all-encompassing and wholly incarnate self, the risen and ascended Christ Jesus can now be so much more for the whole world.

“Stop looking upwards, and go back to become Jesus’ witnesses, not only in Jerusalem, but in all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth

And where does that leave us? Where are we looking, this Sunday after the Ascension? Is there a chance that we are still looking up to clouds, waiting for Jesus to come again? Maybe waiting for him to make things perfectly clear to everyone for once and for all?

And I start wondering if maybe a clue for us is all that talk of glory in our gospel reading. “Glory” – such a big word, filled with the beating of wild angels’ wings, with celestial alleluias, and with dazzling light. And yet, is that how Jesus talks of all this glory? No. Instead Jesus shares with us a beautifully intimate indwelling of God in us, Jesus in us, God in all. Because this seems to be what it’s all about! That it is here that we can know eternal life, right here and now.

And it’s not about us standing or sitting around, watching. This is about us living into a knowledge of this glorious indwelling. A glorious indwelling that’s not just about us and God, us and Jesus, but the whole kit and kaboodle: the whole world, the whole cosmos. As today’s collect reminded us:

*Threefold one, relationship in unity, love given and received through all the ages long*

We can observe the Feast of the Ascension, and its following Sunday as just another piece of the story to remember. Or we can hear it and think about it with fresh ears, challenging ourselves to rise above our very localized awareness of our own situation to something rather more global, even cosmic!

However, for now, maybe we should walk home with those disciples. They went back to that upper room to wait, just as Jesus had told them to. Remember next week is Pentecost. It’s your story too. Don’t be caught in the spectator stands!