

Sermon for Sunday after Ascension, 28.5.17

+ This past week has been one of the most painful for our country in recent years – the initial shock and horror have given way to incredulity and questions. How could anyone deliberately target innocent concert goers, teenagers, parents and children on a Monday evening in Manchester? What kind of person is capable of such evil? Further afield, thirty of our fellow Christians, Coptic Christians, were murdered in Egypt - has the world entirely lost its moral compass?

I don't know the answers to these questions any more than you do, sometimes it all seems overwhelming. But as people of faith we are called neither to give up nor to give in, because we do have another, better, perspective which is called hope. And the Feast of the Ascension, which we celebrated on Thursday and which today's reading from Acts describes, gives us a hope which no terrible event can ever eradicate.

To help us better understand the significance of the Ascension, I'd like to focus on the final verse of a well-known hymn 'O thou, who at thy Eucharist didst pray', which is printed out on the yellow News & Notes sheet: *So, Lord, at length when sacraments shall cease, may we be one with all thy church above, one with thy saints in one unbroken peace, one with thy saints in one unbounded love: more blessed still, in peace and love to be, one with the Trinity in unity.*

I'll come back to the saints, who are mentioned twice in this verse. Today, on the 7th Sunday of Easter we're a long way from All Saints-tide, which is in November, but we are only a few days away from the Feast of the Ascension which was last Thursday. The Ascension isn't given a huge amount of attention, perhaps because it falls on a Thursday, only forty days after Easter and ten days before Pentecost. Which is strange really, when you think that this Feast celebrates the bodily Ascension of Christ, witnessed by a group of people – saints – who went on to found the church. Without the Ascension, the Resurrection would have been just another miracle. And we know that the Ascension must have happened, because otherwise we'd still have a walking, talking, eating Jesus Christ here on earth.

The most crucial aspect of the Ascension, the reason it's so remarkable, is that when he ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, Jesus took us with him. He'd told his disciples that he was going to leave them, and that where he was, so they would be with him. And, here's the crucial bit, he didn't say that only some of them would be with him, only the ones whose lives were noteworthy. This promise was for everyone, those of us who, like Thomas, doubt and question. Even the rash and hasty like impetuous Peter. As Rowan Williams has said: The Ascension of Jesus in this context becomes a celebration of the extraordinary fact that our humanity in all its variety, in all its vulnerability, has been taken by Jesus into the heart of the divine life. And that of course is first of all good news about humanity itself – the humanity that we all know to be stained, wounded, imprisoned in various ways; this humanity – yours and mine – is still capable of being embraced by God, shot through with God's glory, received and welcomed in the burning heart of reality itself. As it says in the hymn, *In peace and love to be, one with the Trinity in Unity.*

Rowan Williams again: Jesus, ascended bodily into heaven, lived on earth. He speaks and hears the human language. Every time we pray to God the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus hears our words. He hears this week's words of pain and protest and rage against senseless violence. He hears them and he takes them and in the presence of God he says, 'This is the humanity I have brought home. It's not a pretty sight, it's not edifying and impressive and holy, it's just real; real and needy and confused and upset, and here it is, this complicated humanity, brought home to heaven, dropped into the burning heart of God – for healing and for transformation.'

Through the Ascension of Christ, God takes us to himself, where we become one with the Trinity. But as with any relationship, this relationship with God must work both ways: Through Christ's Ascension we are taken to the heart of God, who through the Incarnation of his Son descended into the very heart of humanity.

Living and ministering among us, Jesus commanded us to love one another, and by loving us he showed us how to put this commandment into practice. He healed, he loved the poor and the outcast, he touched the leper and he washed dirty feet. He loved us to the end and he prayed for us as we heard in John's Gospel: Holy Father protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

The verse from the hymn speaks of this oneness, of eternity, the time when sacraments shall cease, the time when with the saints we too will be with God *in one unbroken peace and one unbounded love*. But who are these saints who we'll be one with? What kind of people form this strange and eclectic body of male and female saints, whose importance is often overlooked, or even viewed with suspicion? What might we learn from them? The liturgical year is peppered with saints' commemorations, scarcely a week passes without one or other of them being included in our worship – especially important in this Cathedral are Augustine and his companion, Jordan. Some saints are very local and their feast day is celebrated by perhaps one tiny village, for obscure reasons. Others, like St Augustine, St Francis, St Ignatius Loyola, St Teresa of Avila, St Therese of Lisieux, are well-known and their entire lives are documented. All the saints were - and are - holy people, but they were also real people and like us they led real lives. St Francis loved wine, women and song long before God spoke to him in prayer in the Chapel of San Damiano, telling him to rebuild his father's house. For some time Francis continued to get it wrong, until eventually he did grasp the bigger picture, going on to found the Franciscans and becoming celebrated for his alleged love of animals. St Ignatius Loyola was a soldier and only when his knees were shattered by a cannon ball was he forced to give up his life of combat. As his wounds healed this young knight was forced to turn to reading he was so bored, but he soon tired of racy novels and turned to accounts of the lives of saints, which he found inspirational and which led him in a completely new direction. The lives of Francis and Ignatius and many other saints are important because they demonstrate the hope of transformation through faith, heroism, courage and compassion. Through their example of turning to Christ and following the commandment to love one another, we are given a glimpse of heaven here on earth, a foretaste of what the world could be and what is yet to come. And as fellow human beings the saints' well-documented lives represent the many unknown, unsung, ordinary people who through the ages have obeyed the commandment to love, people who have

tended the injured when horror strikes, who have cared for the widow and orphan, comforted the bereaved and coped selflessly with life-changing crises. God works through the saints - and he will work with the most unlikely of us to make his ways known on earth. To bring hope where there is despair, light where there's darkness.

The verse of our hymn ends with the plea that we may *be one with the Trinity in unity*. Next Sunday is the Feast of Pentecost, when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. With the Ascension of Christ to sit at his right hand, God has not abandoned us. The Holy Spirit, as close to us as our own breath, is with us to guide us as we follow in Christ's footsteps. The Holy Spirit gives us courage as we reach out to those in need. The Holy Spirit comforts us when it all seems overwhelming. The Holy Spirit strengthens us and equips us to bring hope to others.

History teaches that there will always be evil in our world. Terrible things will happen and we will fail to love one another as God loves us. In his letter to the Ephesians St Paul warned of this when he wrote: *Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith.*

Being steadfast in our faith means understanding that at his Ascension our Saviour Jesus Christ has taken our broken humanity – all of it – to the heart of God. Being steadfast in our faith means looking to the lives of saints as examples of how to bring heaven to earth, through following Christ's commandment to love one another. Being steadfast in our faith means allowing the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, enabling us to live our lives not as victims who are overwhelmed, but as people who live life to the full and bring life to others, because of our hope in the promises of Christ. Amen.