

**The Ascension of our Lord ushers in the age of Spirit and of Sacrament. Though we seem determined to return to mere flesh or to meagre religion, He is determined to transform us from within, so that our flesh and blood world is turned into the very Kingdom of Heaven, and our bodily life taken up into the limitless life of the Invisible God... so that "even as my flesh is destroyed, *in my flesh, I shall see God*"...**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost...

**I'm sorry I can't be at that difficult meeting tomorrow, I'll be with you in spirit. I'm afraid I can't make it to hospital when you go in for your tests, but I'll be with you in spirit. Unfortunately, we're not around to celebrate your Big Day with you. We will be with you in spirit though...**

**We must all have heard those kind of responses - or given them - to invitations of one kind or another, and we will all have heard *in* them the recognition of our disappointment, and the placatory offer of the next best thing. So we are all confronted with the difficulty, as we listen to the words of our Gospel this morning, of *not* hearing in our Lord's promise "I will be with you in spirit," some of that same sense of second best, of sweetening a bitter pill, ultimately of a disappointing absence.**

**If you had a choice - as you confront the various challenges of life - as you encounter sickness or death; as you grapple with faith, or discerning the will of God; with understanding scripture, perhaps, or simply seeking to live right - if you *had* the choice would you rather do that from your current situation, or would you rather Jesus was physically present as your companion, like he was for the disciples?**

**I suspect, *if* you had that choice, you wouldn't take any longer than me to choose the 'we-don't need-to-wonder-"what-would-Jesus- do"-because-we-can-simply-watch-what-Jesus-is-doing' option. Obviously, we would prefer Jesus was a flesh and blood presence in our lives than a 'spiritual' one. But we would, John's Gospel tells us, be entirely wrong.**

**In fact, it is not *just* John's Gospel, but as we heard, the letter of James, and indeed the whole of the New Testament that makes the point - unequivocally. For all there is a longing expressed there, inspired Paul says *by* the Spirit, for the the *return* of Christ; although the Spirit and the Bride cry out 'Come Lord Jesus', although there is a yearning to be caught up with the Lord in the Heavenly Realms - these are all manifestations of a desire for the final reconciliation of all things in Christ, for the great and terrible day of God's Judgement of the Quick and the Dead, for the *climax*, in other words, of the story of our redemption, *not* for a return to its earlier seasons, or a renewed presence of the Incarnate God as we find him in the pages of the Gospels. (Like only getting as far as the liturgy of the word v. the Ingrafted Word of Sacrament and Spirit...and consequent action IN Christ.)**

**Astonishingly, Jesus insists, that would be worse than our current circumstance. But because we find it so difficult to accept such an idea, so hard to shake off the day-to-day meaning we ascribe to the promise of being 'with us in spirit', we are as mystified as the disciples when Jesus says:**

**When the Spirit comes he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness...of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more**

**We find ourselves bewildered with the twelve, asking what can that mean? Prove the world wrong about righteousness because I go to the Father and ye see me no more?**

**What is it about Jesus bodily absence - his invisibility - that tells us anything at *all*, let alone all we need to know, about righteousness?**

Perhaps it worth very quickly defining our terms. Righteousness has become a quintessentially *religious* word, one meaning something like pious - something to do with behaving in a way that will merit a good report in the final analysis - the very thing I suspect the Spirit came to 'REPROVE'. In fact, the Greek term John records Jesus as using, carried, for Jews, the legal sense of being *declared* right or innocent - not an achievement of your own but an award in the gift of another - or more commonly, for the Greco-Roman world, it conveyed the idea of living the good life - of the steps towards what we might now call happiness.

Jesus own definition of righteousness - of what the good life looks like - is laid out in the Sermon on the Mount. *There* he made it clear that the new way of relating to others cannot be brought about by the old methods of the Pharisees, *here* in his parting words to his followers, he claims that a proper understanding of that righteousness, and a proper entry into it, *depends* on him going to the Father, and on the coming of the Spirit...

Depends on these things because, were he to have stayed bodily present to his disciples from then until now, far from that righteousness increasing in us or in the world at large, far from growing towards a freedom not just from murder but from hatred and anger, not merely from adultery but from the objectification of others; far from being more prone to forgive rather than judge; far from being more likely to absorb evil than to pass it on, we would be less - even less than we are now! But why? - given how slowly that transformation from sinful self interest to cheerful self giving is already progressing - why on earth would the situation be worse if Jesus had not ascended?

Some have argued that Jesus' point is that in his Gospel Ministry he could only be in one place at one time. So, the number of people exposed to the healing, and wisdom, and example of godly living he embodied, would have been more limited than it has been since his presence has been encountered universally through the Holy Spirit, and in the medium of his Body the Church.

But whilst there must be *some* truth in that, stories like the Parable of the Sower, and much of Jesus' teaching, seem to imply that a greater breadth, or *quantity*, of people exposed to the Word is of less importance, in terms of changing the world and advancing the kingdom, than a greater depth or quality, of engagement with the word - the ingrafting of it, James says, that saves our souls. And it is in *this* context that Jesus' claims about the Spirit have their real significance...

Because the plain truth, easily lost in hindsight, is that *before* his Death, Resurrection, and Ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit, the presence of Christ in his ministry had far less of an impact on the righteousness of others, than that ministry taken up and worked out by the Spirit after the Ascension.

And if we were in any doubt about it - a look at the disciples should confirm all - they were certainly not more courageous, more humble or more insightful as a result of spending every waking hour in the company of the Incarnate God, but they become visibly more so, indeed they become manifestly the firstfruits of a whole new *creation*, a new order of humanity entirely, *with* a righteousness surpassing that of the Pharisees, once Jesus has been lifted up - has gone to the Father - once they have received the promised Holy Spirit.

Because our current condition as disciples is not a second rate one, at a greater distance from the source of new life than the first disciples, but rather a fuller one, more intimately, in fact *umbilically* connected to that vital lifeblood, than they had originally been. Just as our sacrament is not a token of an absent deity, *something*, better than nothing, to give us a taste

of his flesh and blood presence, while we wait for the real thing, but a process of partaking in the transforming work of the Holy Spirit which starts at the altar - starts with the death and resurrection and ascension of Christ and spreads out until it utterly changes the substance of our being...of all being.

And here is the core of what Jesus is teaching his followers in this passage, as in all he says and does - the change from unrighteous to righteous; the ordering of unruly wills and affections; the transformation of our old sinful nature into the new glorious nature of the children of God; the redemption and renewal of all creation, happens, can only happen, from the inside out. Not by our striving, not by human wrath, not by our painting onto our old tarnished selves layer after layer of fresh new paint, not even by face to face encounter with God in the Incarnate Son of the Gospels, but by the core of who we are being altered by God's *IN*-dwelling Spirit, bringing us all, as John puts it, in his summary of the Gospel, to be Sons of God born not of human will but of the Spirit, newly begotten of the Word of Truth.

Because Jesus has gone to the Father, the Spirit does **REPROVE** the world as to righteousness, - indeed, the Spirit is re-setting the very *notion* of righteousness, by taking our hearts of stone and replacing them with hearts of flesh, by writing on our hearts God's new Covenant, by fashioning out of human flesh and blood, a new temple, the new Ark, a new Holy of Holies...By welling up in the innermost place of our being a spring, a source and superfluity - not of naughtiness but of overflowing love for the commands of God...

When it comes to righteousness there is a constant tension in us in need of continual reproof - between the twin errors of either fruitlessly trying to become Christlike, striving to obey the commands that constitute the society of God's people, or behaving as if our bodies and our daily decisions were irrelevant in the process of abiding in Christ, and then wondering at the fruitlessness of our faith.

The Spirit will, if we will receive Him with meekness, reconfigure our concept of righteousness, by refusing to allow our moral choices to be attempts to achieve a better standing with God, by refusing to allow our sacramental worship to be the comfort of the next best thing while we wait for the real, but by teaching us instead, in both our lives and our worship, to steadily subject ourselves to His transforming work, by calling us to the daily disciplines of secret and corporate prayer, by drawing us to dig deeply and deliberately into scripture, by inviting us to practice letting go of outward gifts and fleshly desires, so we can discern the hidden luxuries of Love's banqueting table, by determinedly changing us from the inside out, and ultimately taking us into Christ.

Obviously, given the choice, we would prefer Jesus was a flesh and blood presence in our lives rather than a 'spiritual' one. But we would be entirely wrong. Because this is an entirely false distinction in the faith of Easter and Pentecost. Because in the end it was never God's intention that in encountering his Son in flesh and blood, we should merely be *with* him, rather that he should be in us, and that we should be-come him...become, through partaking in his flesh and blood, the very Body of Christ...

The Ascension of our Lord ushers in the age of Spirit and of Sacrament. Though we seem determined to return to mere flesh or to meagre religion, *He* is determined to transform us from within, so that our flesh and blood world is turned into the Kingdom of Heaven itself, and our bodily life taken up into the limitless life of the Invisible God... so that "even as my flesh is destroyed, *in my flesh*, I shall see God"...