24 May 2020: Sunday Worship
The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Acts 1:6-14, John 17:1-11
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+ Jesus said, ‘I am coming to you, Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.’

On Thursday, 40 days after Easter, we celebrated one of the great feasts of the Christian year, that of the Ascension, marking the event described in our reading from Acts. Just before he left them to return to the Father, Jesus tried to reassure his bewildered disciples and to focus their minds on the task ahead of them as his witnesses ‘to the ends of the earth’.

Our gospel reading dealt with a different moment when the disciples had felt confused and anxious about the future, when the air was also pregnant with the prospect of Jesus’ impending departure. The words of Jesus that John reports form the climax of Jesus’ final discourse to his disciples made just before his arrest. Sometimes called the ‘high-priestly prayer’, this passage shows Jesus praying to the Father that He would glorify the Son so that he, the Son, could in turn glorify the Father. Jesus went on to pray for his disciples and thus, by implication, for the whole community of those called to follow him. Just as the Father and Son are one, he prayed that we would be one.

In some ways that prayer, specific to the hour at which it was uttered, could be seen to mark the ascension of Jesus to the Father. Even though he spoke in the context of the Last Supper, from the tone of what he said and the tenses in which he spoke, we might feel that Jesus had already crossed the threshold from time to eternity and was already on the way to the Father, or was at least halfway between this world and that of the Father. This passage may help to explain why the earliest Christians do not seem to have celebrated the Ascension as a separate feast. Only in the fourth century can we find celebrations on the 40th day after Easter; previous generations marked only Easter and Pentecost.
In our current preoccupation with the pandemic and the restrictions it has placed on our lives, we can all respond to the emotions of loss and separation experienced by the disciples at the Last Supper and again when the risen Christ departed for the last time from earthly view. For us, the time since Easter appears simultaneously to have been interminable and yet to have passed at great speed. How can we be in late May already? Yet, we should not forget how tumultuous a period this proved for the disciples who lived through it. They had little time to assimilate, still less to understand and absorb the meaning of the events they had witnessed. For them, forty days must have passed with alarming speed. After the conflicting range of emotions that they had experienced over those short few weeks following the Last Supper, we might well imagine that separation from the risen Christ would have plunged the group back into despair.

The opening of the extract from Acts reminds us that, despite all Jesus had said to them during his earthly ministry and since his resurrection, his disciples had still not abandoned their comfortable belief that the Messiah would restore the fortunes of the Davidic monarchy of Israel. ‘Is this the time you will restore the kingdom?’, they asked, hopefully. Jesus had once more to disabuse them, reminding them that God would determine his own time for the fulfilment of his plans. But He also tried to take their minds away from an understanding focused on a recreated kingdom anywhere, either here on earth, or in a future heaven. ‘You will receive power,’ He said, ‘when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem … and to the ends of the earth.’ He did not send them out as heralds, preaching the future coming of a saviour, but rather urged them to testify to the one who had already been marked out by the Holy Spirit, received in glory, the one who now sits enthroned at the right hand of the Almighty.

He promised their future personal transformation and empowerment, yet he tantalised them by making them wait in suspension, bereft of his consoling presence on earth. That suspension would not be resolved until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, an event which would infuse the life of the Church in new ways. The ministry of the apostles would in future be celebrated, but at this moment in Ascensiontide we, with the first disciples, remain in suspense, hanging between promise and fulfilment.

In praying to the Father and asking him to glorify the Son, Jesus revealed the Father to his disciples. He thus opened a new chapter on earth in which the life of eternity could now be experienced. The Jesus in whom the Father was revealed possesses the authority to give eternal life to all who have known him. Not just to those who met him in the
flesh, but to all we who have confessed him, crucified and risen, as the Son of God. As we prepare to say the creed in which we affirm our faith in our Lord, risen, ascended and glorified, we recall in our hearts with gratitude all those apostles who proclaimed that faith to the ends of the earth, all those who brought each of us to faith.

God of glory

your Son Jesus Christ suffered for us

and ascended to your right hand:

Unite us with Christ and with each other

in suffering and isolation and in joyful expectation,

that all your children may be one,

and be drawn into your bountiful dwelling. AMEN