

Ascensiontide Sermon Easter 7A 17.5.26 – John 17.1-11

Belonging divine and down to earth...

A colleague signed off a greeting this week:

“With all good wishes in **this holy interval between Ascension and Pentecost.**”

This last Sunday of the Easter Season **feels like an interval, a moment to draw breath** between the great dramatic scenes of Easter and Pentecost.

It’s a bit **like a pep talk at half time**, to regroup and be refreshed before being sent out on the pitch!

So, let’s gather round to find strength and vision from Jesus’ “high priestly prayer” in John 17. It is a prayer for his first disciples – and for all disciples ever since – including us!

Although it is placed just before Jesus’ arrest, trial and death, his prayer is also looking far into the future, beyond Easter and Ascension, asking God to protect all his followers in the world, so that they may be ONE.

Let’s look briefly at this first part of Jesus’ prayer, through a mystical lens, drawing on one or two mystics to help us!

BELONGING TO GOD

We all know that times of change and uncertainty call into question our identity and we find ourselves asking – Who am I now – in this new situation? Which may also raise the question – **where do I belong? What Key relationships define me?**

I recall vividly the first months of being an adoptive mother of two lively toddlers and a newly priested curate in training. I was floundering in both areas and feeling uncertain, quite possibly unhinged! 😊 After an especially bad night, I remember walking towards a meeting with my training incumbent, wondering “who am I in all of this struggle?” With crystal clarity I landed on my answer: – **I am a beloved child of God – I belong to God who loves me with a steadfast, faithful love.**

Jesus’ prayer invites us into this loving relationship within God’s very being. Canon Lucy Winkett talks about God pulling us “through a portal into a deeper spiritual connection with the divine presence that we cannot see.”

Within this loving relationship Jesus prays about glory, authority and eternal life. The glory that the Father and the Son give and receive is not self-adulation, nor the glory of success or fame and popularity – but the glory of God’s presence, God with us in the middle of suffering love, shown through Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. This is God’s glory.

And through this glory, comes eternal life – life with God – belonging to God, beloved by God. It is life in God’s Kingdom – as we pray “Thy Kingdom Come”, rather than conforming simply to earthly rulers and powers.

Through this prayer Jesus is inviting us to come **to know God**. Yet this is not a head knowledge about God, but a deep, relational knowing and belonging to God who is love.

The 14th century monk and mystic Walter Hilton may help us grasp this kind of deep knowing of God:

Turn reason into light

By itself knowledge is like water,

Tasteless and cold.

Lord Jesus, I offer this knowledge humbly to you,

And ask for your grace.

Turn the water into wine with your blessing

As you did at the request of your mother at the marriage feast.

By the gift of your Holy Spirit,

Turn this savourless knowledge into wisdom,

And cold naked reason into spiritual light and burning love.

As we turn towards God, may **our knowledge be turned “into burning love and spiritual light.”**

For the mystic, writes Lucy Winkett, “now is important”. The only reality we have and all that matters is God NOW. Everything falls into place around this priority.

Maybe during this Holy interval between ascension and Pentecost – we can make room for the mystic within us:

With whomever God gives you to love NOW..

With your longing for God, for the Ascended Christ – closer than your breath – NOW

With all living things, connected to all creation NOW

Where tears well up and are close to the surface as you yearn for peace, mercy, forgiveness, for healing NOW.

There your heart is – there is your belonging to God and a deep knowing.

BELONGING TO GOD’S PEOPLE

Our belonging to God, in this relationship of love, shapes our belonging to one another.

Our divine belonging goes hand in hand with down to earth belonging to God’s people. “They are in the world, Holy Father, protect them in your name... so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Our mini walk cum pilgrimage on Thursday felt like a taster of this call to walk together, to stick together and pray together, (as those first disciples did at the ascension). Jesus prayed that his disciples would be protected from infighting and power struggles and jealousies and whatever else tears us apart, so that our “oneness” offers hope to a divided world. God’s reconciling love shines through.

Here I draw on a second mystic – to guide our belonging and engagement:

(Slide) Sister Thea Bowman, an African American Roman Catholic Sister, grand-daughter to a slave, born in racially segregated Mississippi in 1937. At the age of 15, she joined a Franciscan religious community, and devoted her life, her music and teaching, to celebrating all that her African American sisters and brothers had to offer to the Church in North America.

Her talks inspired them to be Black, Catholic and proud of their heritage and the gifts they brought to the church.

In spite of her breast cancer, she went on preaching and living life to the full. Just a few weeks before she died, aged 52, she spoke to a conference of mainly white RC bishops – calling the church to be ONE, as Jesus prayed:

“Today we’re called to walk together in a new way toward that Land of Promise and to celebrate who we are and whose we aren’t.

If we, as a Church, walk together – don't let nobody separate you – that's one thing black folk can teach you – don't let folks divide you up – you know, put the lay folk over here and the clergy over here – put the bishops in one room and the clergy in the other room – put the women over here and the men over here –

The Church teaches us that the Church is a family of families and the family got to stay together and we know, that if we do stay together, come here brother – we know that if we do stay together – if we walk and talk and work and play and stand together in Jesus' name – we'll be who we say we are – truly "Catholic" and we shall overcome – overcome the poverty – overcome the loneliness – overcome the alienation and build together a Holy city, a new Jerusalem, a city set apart where they'll know that we are here because we love one another."

Jesus prayed for our belonging – sharing in the love between the Father, the Son (and the Holy Spirit to come..)

Jesus prayed for our belonging to God's people – to be one – so that together we can build a new community where love wins.

In this Ascensiontide season – let's discover the mystic in each of us..

Come Holy Spirit – fill us and lead us into LOVE.

EXTRA

Two of Sister Thea's greatest gifts were her **singing and preaching**. She captivated audiences around the world with a **message of encouragement, hope, resistance and transformation**. She called on white communities to make space for people of colour in the church and to embrace diversity. **Racism goes against the Gospel, as it thrives on marginalization and dehumanization**. Sister Thea showed that resistance against racism compels us to live the Gospel more fully and to create a more loving and just society for all.

Ascension is not just about Jesus being taken into the Godhead – ascending to the right hand of the Father, as our creed puts it, but about raising humanity, all creation, into the life of God. Earlier in John's Gospel Jesus claims: (John 12.32) "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people / all things to myself." (Both hinting at crucifixion and ascension).

Jesus' prayer in John 17 echoes the Lord's prayer: Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus brought heaven to earth in his life on earth, and brings earth to heaven through his resurrection and ascension.

Jesus prays that his followers will come to know God's glory, but not the glory of fame, status, or success. Instead, God's glory in this prayer points

to the weight and presence of God, revealed most fully in the costly, self-giving love of Jesus.