

Ascension to Pentecost 1



“Jesus... was carried up into heaven” Luke 24.51

A pair of disappearing feet is often all that's shown of the ascending Jesus by mediaeval artists. At first sight, this has a touch of the ridiculous about it. Our understanding of the universe has changed significantly since this was painted on the walls of Seething Church in South Norfolk. A body being zoomed up into a cloud? A gaggle of friends beneath dangling feet? What are we to make of all this?

The Ascension certainly celebrates the fact that the reign of the crucified and risen one is now no longer limited by time and space: as the historical Jesus becomes the cosmic Christ, loving relationship with him is freely accessible to all. But New Testament writers hardly imagined a literal divine dwelling-place in the sky. It was natural to them though, to draw on ideas and images from the Old Testament as they explained that after a while, Jesus

no longer appeared in material form to his disciples. He 'ascended', he left the scene, and is now 'seated at the right hand of the Father', meaning that, as Rowan Williams has put it, "when we look at God, we can't help but see Jesus."

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

We notice that the Seething painter has marked each foot with a dark round nail-hole, stressing that the ascending feet are wounded feet. It is the wounded human condition being carried into heaven. Perhaps he had in mind the traumas of his own century – war, plague, civil unrest – as his brush made those holes dark and deep.

We too can gratefully acknowledge that all the distress of our current situation is borne by the ascended Jesus into the divine presence. The global grief brought by Covid 19 is gathered into God.

“The ascension of Christ tilts the universe for us; it gives us a fresh perspective and meaning for the world.”

Richard Bartlett (USPG)

Prayer

Ascended Christ,
you stand in solidarity
with the weak and wounded
of every time and place:
may we do so too. Amen

Ascension to Pentecost 2



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As they were watching... a cloud took Jesus out of their sight. Acts 1.9

Peter Rogers painted this dazzling image of the ascending Christ in 1963. Feet already off the ground and face and arms reaching up, Jesus is enveloped in a whitish-gold cloud which streams downwards to receive him. On the left, the "two men in white" (Acts 1.10) ask the awestruck disciples why they are staring upwards. The flames encircling them speak of the fiery power of God and hint at Pentecost.

Biblical writers often use clouds to symbolise the divine presence. Think of the pillar of cloud guiding the Israelites out of Egypt, or the cloud covering Mt Sinai as Moses speaks with God, or the bright cloud during the Transfiguration from which God speaks to the disciples. This divine presence is one of fathomless mystery and, just like the clouds in our skies, is constantly on the move - sometimes concealing, sometimes revealing, always mesmerising.

In the late 14th century, a mystic from the Midlands encouraged his pupils to run with the cloud metaphor as they tried to pray. Accept that God is fathomless mystery, he said, and enter 'the cloud of your unknowing'! There, even though you can't see, you'll have a better chance of glimpsing God.

What do we make of all this cloud-talk in the context of coronavirus?

That nameless author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' lived in uncertain times. As well as war and social

unrest, he, like us, lived in a time of pandemic. In his youth, the Black Death had raged across England, killing maybe half its people. And it kept coming back.

His response? To long for God. To turn to contemplative prayer in his 'little soul-room'. To accept the limitations of reason and embrace mystery. To glimpse God lovingly waiting for him in the cloud of his unknowing.

It seems a perfect approach for Ascensiontide. Perhaps for the wider times in which we live too?

"The ascension of Christ tilts the universe for us; it gives us a fresh perspective and meaning for the world."

Richard Bartlett (USPG)

Prayer

**Mysterious, waiting God
forgive us when we assume
we can fathom your depths,
and deepen our search for you
in the cloud of unknowing. Amen**

Ascension to Pentecost 3



"The ascension of Christ tilts the universe for us; it gives us a fresh perspective and meaning for the world."

Richard Bartlett (USPG)

Prayer

Ascended Lord,
from enforced absence
help us to learn
the lessons of love.
Amen

"Jesus withdrew from them..." Luke 24.51

This face is a detail from an exquisite image of the Ascension painted in mediaeval Florence, c1340. It is one of many upturned faces gazing helplessly as the beloved one leaves.

This is Mary's face, a mother's face as she loses her child. It is the second time that this Mater Dolorosa, this Mother of Sorrows, has stood underneath her son, watching and waiting and weeping. After the mad joy of the resurrection, the thrill of experiencing her son alive again, this is a second bereavement. Another parting. Her sorrow is quiet and there is resignation here but the nameless painter also reveals the unmistakable pain of this fresh separation.

What do we see as we gaze at Mary's face in the context of coronavirus?

We may be reminded of the enforced separation from family, experienced by many during the lockdown of recent weeks. Mary's physical presence with her son may stir our compassion for those parents who could *not* watch and wait and weep by the hospital bedsides of their children. Her loss twice-lived may bring to mind stories of joyous recovery from COVID-19 followed shockingly a little later by a more severe return of the illness and a permanent parting.

As it has reflected upon its meaning, Ascension has become a great feast day of the Church though our current context helps us see that celebration was probably not uppermost in the minds of those who saw Jesus go. Perhaps, however, you will appreciate these insights from Barbara Brown Taylor, musing on the Ascension: *"Sometimes I think that absence is under-rated. It is not nothing, after all. It is something: a heightened awareness, a sharpened appetite, a finer perception. When someone important to me is absent from me, I become clearer what that person means to me. Details lost in our togetherness are recalled in our apartness: their sudden clarity has the power to prise my heart right open."*

How might the perspective offered by absence affect your relationships when together again?

Ascension to Pentecost 4



“The ascension of Christ tilts the universe for us; it gives us a fresh perspective and meaning for the world.”

Richard Bartlett (USPG)

Prayer

Ascended Christ,
you rule over all:
may we live and love
in the light of your reign.
Amen

The Father gives the Son “authority over all”

John 17.2

High above Rio de Janeiro stands this famous statue. It is a wonderful symbol for the Ascension. Christ’s outstretched arms certainly speak of crucifixion but they speak too of both compassion and authority. It seems as if they are long enough, open enough, to encompass the whole of the sprawling city below. From his vantage point, Christ-over-Rio can, as it were, see into every one of those glittering homes, shielding but also challenging those who live within: the vantage point means that *he* is also visible to *them*, a commanding presence they know is there even if they don’t look up.

Rio’s Christ is no walk-over. Serene but imposing, he is the one to whom ‘all authority in heaven and on earth has been given’ (Mt 28.18). No wonder there were ructions within the Roman world as the early Church started exploring what this meant. No wonder that the Ascension has been called the most *political* of Christian doctrines.

What do we see as we gaze at this statue in the context of coronavirus?

Our Ascension hymns are full of crowns and thrones and sceptres but in this photo, we see that Rio’s ‘king’ has been cleverly illuminated so that he wears blue scrubs under the white coat of a doctor, a stethoscope round his neck. Though the one who ‘took the form of a slave’ is now ‘highly exalted’ (Phil 2.7 and 9), he is still a servant-king, tenderly caring for the sick and dying and walking in solidarity beside the world’s key workers. The affirmation of the Ascension is that the crucified and risen Christ is in control even when it feels as if everything is *out* of control.

To acknowledge that Christ is King has huge implications for the way we live. We see things from a different perspective... What might happen if we accepted the challenge to find ‘higher ground’ with Christ this Ascensiontide? Our understanding of ourselves, our communities, our global home would undoubtedly be broadened. What fresh insights about our current situation might we gain?

Ascension to Pentecost 5



“Stay in Jerusalem and wait” Acts 1.5

The crabs may be nipping their feet, but they do not move a muscle. The wind may howl off the sea into their faces but their gaze horizon-wards does not flinch. At high tide as at low tide, they stand resolutely upright, unwavering whatever the waves.

The figures we see here are just some of the 100 cast-iron men who form Antony Gormley’s famous installation on the beach at Crosby. He called the work “Another Place” and uppermost in his mind were the millions in our world forced by hunger, war or abuse to leave home and face whatever new future comes.

In these days between Ascension and Pentecost, we remember the disciples obeying Jesus’ directive to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. It must have been easy to waver, to long for the easy familiarity of a fishing boat and go home to Galilee, to let fear and uncertainty win the day. But in the gritty steadfastness of the Crosby statues, we can perhaps glimpse some of the qualities

of the disciples’ own focussed waiting, their courage in facing whatever the Spirit’s arrival would bring.

What do we see as we gaze at these figures in the context of coronavirus?

We may ruefully note their effortless social distancing! And perhaps the installation’s title makes us wonder to what ‘other place’ our own lives are heading. What will our ‘new normal’ look like?

Perhaps too, in this photo, we see humanity at large waiting longingly for the hints of hopeful rose in the sky to dawn into a new day for our world.

Perhaps the constancy of the figures inspires more constancy in us as we gather with the disciples in that upper room and wait. Our need is as great as theirs but will our anticipation of the Spirit’s arrival be as keen – not just in these days pre-Pentecost but throughout the post-pandemic future ahead?

“The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality.”

John V Taylor

Prayer

**Spirit of God,
we need you
and wait for you:
come afresh
into our lives. Amen**

Ascension to Pentecost 6



“The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality.”
John V Taylor

Prayer
Mothering God,
grace us with your Spirit
that we may not be
comfortless. Amen

“I will not leave you orphaned” John 14.18

One of the most harrowing of biblical verses is Jeremiah's depiction of the matriarch Rachel weeping inconsolably for the loss of her 'children' killed by the Babylonians: "She refuses to be comforted" (31.15). It is bleak indeed not to be able to access comfort in times of loss and trauma.

The German artist Käthe Kollwitz knew about this bleakness. She experienced deep and prolonged depression after losing a son on the battlefields of WWI. In this drawing she shows us the depth of the bond between a mother and child and makes clear how shattering separation would be. The two figures are locked together, the woman's sturdy arms and hands enfolding her little one with infinite tenderness. We know that if we were that baby, we would feel utterly safe.

When Jesus breaks the news to his disciples that he must leave them, he says, "I will not leave you orphaned". Rather, knowing that they will feel as bereft as a parentless child, he will send them another '*paráklētos*' to be with them for ever. Initially, this Greek word was a legal one and is often translated 'advocate'

but it had also come to have the wider meaning of one who stands alongside, supporting, comforting. Parenting the disciples in Jesus' stead, the Holy Spirit was to offer both protection and tenderness.

What do we see as we gaze at this drawing in the context of coronavirus?

We may think of those separated from parents or children by lockdown. Or those for whom the virus has brought separation by death, the current rawness of whose loss makes comfort impossible.

But we may also see in the drawing the God who says: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (Is 66.13a), waiting to pick us up and cradle us as soon as we are ready.

And in those strong, shielding arms, the 'comforter' Jesus promised to send.

Ascension to Pentecost 7



**"The Holy Spirit is that power
which opens eyes that are closed,
hearts that are unaware and minds
that shrink from too much reality."**
John V Taylor

Prayer
Holy, hovering dove
bring hope into our chaos
and a bright new beginning.
Amen

The Holy Spirit descended... like a dove Luke 3.22

Most of the canvas of this Pentecost image by John Brokenshire (b.1958) is covered by a deep, inky darkness, blue-black. There seems to be nothing else apart from a central shimmering. Here though, there is movement, a suggestion of beating wings, discernible wing-tips.

The artist wanted 'to convey a sense of a hovering bird' and offers strong intimations of the early verses of Genesis, darkness covering the face of the deep and the spirit of God 'hovering on the chaos of the world's first day', as John Bell puts it. Bird and spirit are images which go hand in hand and so the painting also speaks of that same Spirit which would re-create the disciples, filling them with radiant courage.

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

Perhaps it is the darkness more than anything which resonates. But the longer we look, the more we see that it is not a dead darkness. It is not nothing. The delicate shimmering is casting delicate strands of light for one thing, and for another, we are acutely conscious of the

sky in the top left hand corner. Something is happening. A new dawn? A new creation? Malachi's "Sun of righteousness" maybe, "rising with healing in its wings"?

'Hope is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul', wrote the poet Emily Dickinson, and Brokenshire's bird certainly radiates hope. He wanted it to lead us into an inner space – "not a place of sanctuary, but of involvement, journey, even encounter".

Where might it lead us? How might the new creation offered this Pentecost by God's Spirit present itself? A heightened awareness of our interdependence with each other and the whole created order? A simpler, softer footprint?

In the first verse of his recent poem (May 2020), Malcolm Guite muses thus:

*Perhaps in all this crisis, all this pain,
This reassessment of our loss and gain,
Nature rebukes our brief authority
Yet offers us the chance to start again
And this time with a new humility...*

Ascension to Pentecost 8



**“The Holy Spirit is that power
which opens eyes that are closed,
hearts that are unaware and minds
that shrink from too much reality.”**

John V Taylor

Prayer

Steady our focus, O God,
as we wait for your Spirit,
and strengthen the bonds
between us, your disciples.
Amen

“...they were all together in one place.” Acts 2.1

This illuminated letter (c1430) is from a liturgical songbook attributed to Stefano da Verona. An initial A is formed by two sinewy dragons, their necks intertwining to form the crossbar. Sitting snugly inside their curving bodies are the twelve disciples (Matthias having replaced Judas) who, in turn, circle a woman in blue. After the Ascension they were ‘constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary, Jesus’ mother’ (Acts 1.14). So here they all are.

Closely, as if for comfort, they huddle up, turning anxious faces this way and that. The soft colours of the artist’s palette seem to accentuate their vulnerability and the reassuring hand-on-shoulder (foreground figures) is a tender thing indeed.

Nothing has happened yet and uncertainty fills the air but they are obediently waiting as instructed. We know, however, because we have a privileged view into the heavens above, that the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove is about to be sent forth by the Father.

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

We might well look twice at the proximity of those bodies... to lockdown eyes they are too close for comfort! Yet they may also stir in us a longing for the closeness we have lost. Even so, we won’t be able to gather physically together with fellow-disciples this Pentecost or put a reassuring hand on the shoulder of one especially anxious.

Yes, we’ve found other ways of being ‘together in one place’ - technology enables us to assemble in groups and look into human faces - but you do not have to see or touch another to be together in mood, to be of one heart and mind, to wait expectantly as a body.

In these last days before Pentecost, there is comfort in knowing that we are all together in the ‘place’ of our corporate waiting, bound closely in our longing for all that the Spirit brings.

Ascension to Pentecost 9



'The doors... were locked for fear' John 20.19

It's only in Acts that we find the fifty-day spacing between the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In John's gospel, both take place as different elements of the first Easter Day and in this panel from his famous altarpiece in Siena Cathedral, Duccio captures the very moment Jesus appears to his disciples on the evening of that day (John 20.19-23).

They are in a house in Jerusalem, the doors of which, John tells us, "were locked for fear of the Jews". Just two days after Jesus had been executed for treason, rumours of resurrection were gathering pace and the city was on high alert, its officials hostile and cagey. A door stands centrally in the painting and Duccio paints a stout horizontal beam across it, underlining not just the depth of the disciples' anxiety but also the impossibility of normal entry. Duccio positions Jesus against this door and cross-bar in a way which makes it impossible not to think again of crucifixion. But if we miss the artist's nudge in that direction, we have only to look at Jesus' feet. Risen he may be, but still wounded. The disciples converge on him from either side, amazed, full of questions, sorely in need of that 'Shalom', that 'Peace', which is his greeting.

What do we see as we gaze at the painting in the context of coronavirus?

We see emotions very familiar during a pandemic. We see the sort of fear which isolates and separates. We see a longing for reassurance and peace and, as if to emphasise the depth of their trauma, John tells us that Jesus said "Peace be with you" to his friends not once but twice.

We also see a crucified and risen Christ who knows no boundaries, whose presence fills this whole wide world as well as the homes of those quaking behind closed doors. He longs to share his Shalom with us. Lockdown or no lockdown, he is present.

"The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality."

John V Taylor

Prayer

Crucified and risen Christ,
when life is locked down
and fear fastens the latch,
slip into our midst
and bring us your peace. Amen

Ascension to Pentecost 10



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“He breathed on them...” John 20.22

The beautiful breathy swirls we see in Jan Richardson’s painting accompany her “Blessing of Breathing” written out of her own experience of grief and fear, those close companions. Within months of their marriage, she was severed by his sudden death from the husband with whom a wonderful new life was just beginning. She knows how grief squeezes the breath out of you, leaving a hard knot of panic where your heart should be.

Holed up in Jerusalem, the disciples are similarly severed. The death of the one who had made life real for them, on whom they’d pinned their hopes and dreams, had left them reeling, knocked the life out of them.

And into their grief and fear, Jesus comes. And, echoing the divine breathing into the nostrils of newly created humanity (Gen 2.7), he breathes into his disciples. He softens the stony knot of their panic. He re-animates them with the breath of his risen life.

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

The breath painted by Jan Richardson is vigorous, full of movement. Against a dark background streaked only by nauseous yellow (bottom left), the blue-white whorls are fresh, minty, clean. This is the new holy air for which our 21st century world longs. For which we each long.

In John’s gospel, the breath of the Spirit comes ‘on the first day of the week’: Luke tells us the rushing wind arrives at Pentecost, when the first-fruits of grain and grape were harvested. The old week is over, the winter past – both settings underline the grace-filled newness with which the Spirit sweeps in. The gift of newness is ours too. Christ is breathing still. He is breathing into the dashed hopes, the deadening grief and fear brought by pandemic. He is filling the lungs of this weary world with his life. Like those first disciples, it will again be possible for *us* to breathe easily, interact freely, look to the future with hope.

**“The Holy Spirit is that power
which opens eyes that are closed,
hearts that are unaware and minds
that shrink from too much reality.”**

John V Taylor

Prayer

**Breathe, O Christ,
into our grief and fear
and fill us with
fresh purpose,
fresh hope. Amen**

Ascension to Pentecost 11



“The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality.”

John V Taylor

Prayer

Holy Spirit of God,
fill and enflame us,
then send us out
ablaze with your love.
Amen

‘Tongues, as of fire, appeared among them’ Acts 2.3

You may recognise the setting for this ‘Pentecost’: it is the Cathedral Church of the Holy Spirit, Guildford and, in 2007, this painting hung there during an exhibition by its artist, Kate Wilson.

Twelve figures are dotted about the nave. Wilson has brought Jesus’ first disciples to Surrey, catapulting them into our culture. They are no longer figures from a distant time and place but inhabit the world which is ours. And along with the disciples, she has brought the Holy Spirit. Literal tongues of fire rest on each head and huge flames leap in the vast spaces above.

Luke paints *his* picture of the Spirit’s arrival – the fiery tongues, the rushing wind, the strange new ability to be understood – in a mere 3 verses (Acts 2.2-4). Then he gives no less than 27 verses to Peter’s fiery, joyous speech to the multi-national festival crowds. As Jane Williams writes, “This makes clear what the gift of the Holy Spirit is for... not to fill us with religious feelings or give us unshakeable certainty or power, but primarily, to allow the disciples – and us – to do as Jesus said: to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth”.

What do we see as we gaze at the painting in the context of coronavirus?

We will probably see first that, uncannily, the figures seem to know about social distancing and also that they are inside a church – an experience denied most of us for months. But much more important is to acknowledge the weight Luke gives to witness and ask about *afterwards*. We know how transformational the Spirit’s arrival was to the disciples in Jerusalem but what about those in Guildford? What will they do when *they* leave the building?

And what about us? What will we do now that Pentecost is here? Are we open to being Spirit-led in our witness both during and after pandemic? How might the Spirit want to set us on fire? What winds of change must we embrace?