

## **Sixth Sunday of Easter 2018 (6.05.18)**

**Acts 10: 44 – end; John 15: 9 – 17**

Thursday of this coming week is Ascension Day. There will be a service here at 6.30pm. In a way it's a pity that it's on a Thursday. Because realistically I know we're not going to get as big a congregation as we get on a Sunday morning. A Thursday evening service is always going to be something of a minority interest sport. But that's when the Ascension falls, every year, because it's 40 days after Easter; then there's another 10 days until Pentecost, which is 50 days after Easter. So we can't avoid it being on a Thursday, which is a pity because it's an important day. And it would be really good if as many people as possible could make it their discipline to come at 6.30pm.

It's important because the Ascension is what explains the nature of the relationship we have through Jesus with God. It doesn't describe what Jesus did for us – the way he was born, lived his life, died for us and rose

from the dead – but it does show us how we relate to God through Jesus. And it does this through the story of Jesus, one Thursday afternoon, zooming up into a cloud.

It's a story that is full of comedic potential, especially when you express it like that. And you can imagine all sorts of sound effects that might accompany it. When I was a student we had a stained glass window in our college chapel that depicted the Ascension. The disciples were standing around on a hillside and a pair of angels is pointing to a pair of whacking foot prints on the ground. But the disciples are all looking upwards to a cloud. And pair of dirty great feet is dangling out of the bottom of the cloud! If you're not careful a piece of serious devotional art is reduced to a comical cartoon.

And we need to be careful. Because this is only a cartoon to the literal minded. We need to be careful not to think ourselves so clever, so proud of our

intellectual achievements and technological advances that we dismiss people of bygone eras as simpletons; and fail to recognise that our souls have become cramped and impoverished by the very achievements we are proudest of. We have lost the ability to hear God's truth in story and imagery. We've turned myth into a dirty word as if it challenges truth, when in actual fact it conveys truth that is too profound to be expressed through literal descriptions. The Bible is not meant to be taken literally. It's worth so much more than that.

In the Bible a cloud is not a meteorological feature. It is a theological feature. A cloud in Bible-speak for the presence of God. The small congregation that meets every weekday morning in the Chapel here in the Priory have for the last few weeks been reading the books of Exodus and Numbers. It's been all about Moses leading the people out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, ready to enter the Promised Land. And whenever God speaks to Moses, the cloud

descends and Moses meets with God in the cloud. Now, at Christmas we spoke of how God stooped down to join divinity to humanity by assuming human flesh and being born as one of us; by becoming the man Jesus of Nazareth. He becomes one of us. At the Ascension that man Jesus, who is one of us, joins humanity to divinity by going into the cloud. The Ascension shows us that the nature of the relationship we can have with God, because of Jesus, is like a face to face relationship.

In this morning's Gospel reading from St John's Gospel Jesus is preparing his disciples for the Ascension and explaining to them what it will be like after the Ascension. That's why we're reading it on the Sunday before Ascension Day. The passage from which it comes in John's Gospel is often referred to as the "farewell discourse." Jesus is saying farewell to his disciples and preparing them for what it's going to be like after he is no longer physically with them. And what it's like is, that although the man Jesus is no

longer present, there is a new sort of presence that is not confined to one place. Wherever we are, we are always in that theological cloud because we've been drawn into God by Jesus. We are face to face with God.

And that means we can have a friendship with God. We can't initiate it because God is God and we're just us. So God chooses us, we don't choose him. But he no longer calls us servants: he calls us friends. This is so different to the general human religious experience, which apprehends a scary god out there that must be placated. We're so hard wired to this apprehension of god that it's hard to shake off. Our instinctive attitude to God is to worry that we'll be found out and get into trouble. And we will keep attributing to him all sorts of rules and prohibitions.

And do you know what? 'Twas ever thus. We've been reading about it this morning in the Bible itself. The earliest Christians, who we read about in the Acts of

the Apostles, tore themselves apart about who could and couldn't be a Christian and what conditions had to be fulfilled before they could be. And whilst they were going blue in the face arguing over scripture and tradition, with self-referentially water-tight Biblical arguments all stacked up, God just ignored them and kept pouring his Holy Spirit with complete lack of discrimination.

And it's still happening. From the formal rules that forbid gay people from being married in church – and forbid gay clergy from being married anywhere – to the casual bitchy comments at the back of the Priory about the way people come dressed for Baptisms: we're still refusing to love others as God loves us; and to impose rules as if by doing so we could restrict whom God loves. And all the time some of us are gay and some of us are straight; and some of us have best clothes that are more often seen in night clubs than churches. And we need to get over it. Because God has. Amen.