

Seventh Sunday of Easter 2017 (Evensong)

Ephesians 1: 15 – end

The New Testament lesson, from Ephesians, finishes with some striking imagery: “And [God] has put all things under [Jesus’] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” The church is the body of Jesus. They are words that easily trip off our tongues. Often when we celebrate Communion together, when it comes to the Peace, the president will say “We are the body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body. Let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.” Today is the day to examine a bit more closely what we might mean when we say that we are the body of Christ.

Thursday of last week was Ascension Day. It concluded the narrative of God being incarnate on earth in the person of Jesus. Remember, Jesus is God.

He’s not some sort of representative of God, or agent of God: he is the Real Deal. Jesus was nothing less than God’s self, walking around on earth. So, God normally lives in heaven. (I know the Bible’s understanding of cosmology is a bit primitive, but let’s just use its language; or we’re not going to have any other way of taking about this.) God normally lives in heaven, up there.

About 2000 years ago God decided not just to stay up there, but spent about 30+ years down here. That’s what we call the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He got himself born, he was brought up in the home of Mary and Joseph; he taught, he healed, he modelled an ideal way of living; he was arrested, he was executed, he was resurrected from the dead; he appeared to his followers and he went back again whence he came. That’s it; job’s done; we’ve come full circle and we’ve ended back at the beginning where we started: God is where he normally lives, up in heaven. And of course we have a written deposit, the four Gospels, to remind

us of the impact that episode had on life down here and to have some ongoing influence on us.

But logically the impact of that influence should fade more and more with each successive generation. I adored my grandparents. They each had a significant influence on me. And even though they died between 20-odd and 35 years ago my memory of them is a very real, living memory. But what's struck me over the years as I've been sharing these memories with our children is that, to them, they're not living memories: they're just names from history. And it's yeah, yeah Dad we know your grandad had a false leg called Oscar; and we know your grandmother wore black knickerbockers with white lace frills just above the knee; but, for them there's no connection, because these people were not part of their lives.

That logic does not apply to Jesus. His impact does not fade. And that's because that version of the cycle of the incarnation – from birth, through earthly

ministry and death and resurrection and to ascension – is defective in two respects. It's defective firstly because the Ascension is not the end of the story. There's still Pentecost to come, so the influence of Jesus is not just a historical deposit, but is sustained by the dynamic force of the Spirit. But more about that next week when we celebrate Pentecost.

The more fundamental way in which it's wrong, though, is to suggest that it's just a cycle that takes us back to where we were at the beginning. Jesus isn't just sitting at the right hand of the Father as he had been from before the time began up to the time when he thought "I know: I'll become incarnate." Jesus has changed everything. Because of Jesus, God is no longer just 'up there'. Jesus broke out of eternity into the earth's space/time continuum and now is eternally and inalienably present in that continuum. Jesus is present in us; and that presence is to be realised through faith.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

No wonder people of other faith traditions were so scandalised when they heard Peter and Paul and the rest spreading the good news of Jesus. He scandalously changes the whole concept of what God is about. God isn't just the holy of holies. His holiness, his unapproachableness is utterly compromised to the extent that he is identified with our humanity. He is divine; he is part of the godhead; he is head over everything; but his body is us. We are the body of Christ.

And that brings with it all the wonderful stuff that the writer of the letter to the Ephesians rejoices in: the immeasurable greatness of God's power for those who believe; and a clear hope of a glorious inheritance with all the saints. But, my word, it's daunting as well, to be the body of Christ; to live with love towards each other; to exercise venturesome love and irresponsible compassion to all we meet; to walk humbly and to love mercy. That's a big ask and it's the responsibility we can't evade once we feel the call of God on our lives.

No wonder, in this period between Ascension and Pentecost, we eagerly await the gift of the Holy Spirit; because it's only with the grace of the Spirit that we can discharge the responsibility of our calling.

Amen.