

The Seventh Sunday of Easter: Where is the Exalted Christ?

Readings: Acts 1:15-26; John 17:6-19

The middle of May is hardly pantomime season. But celebrating Jesus' ascension into heaven is a bit like that old pantomime routine: 'Where is he?' – 'He's behind you!' – 'Oh no, he's not!' – 'Oh yes, he is!' – 'Where's he gone now?' – and so on.

He's there – he's not there – he's everywhere – he's nowhere... Trying to *locate* this Jesus, to pin him down, seems hopeless. Even if you do think you've glimpsed him, he slips away, or he pops up backstage, or out in the street. Anyway, isn't it futile to seek the one who said 'I am no longer in the world'? Whatever else this strange story of his ascension suggests, doesn't it affirm that for practical purposes Christ is *absent*, 'no longer in the world'?

Yet we asked in the prayer for today that God will 'exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before'. So where is that place?

Surely it cannot mean a *literal* 'exalting': defying gravity by rising above the earth. (Should you need convincing of the absurdity of this, then visit the little Chapel of the Ascension in the shrine at Walsingham, where the only visible sign of Jesus is the sculpted soles of his feet in the ceiling. Or to a church I used to attend in Manchester, gazing at a large stained-glass window of the Ascension, where a weirdly dressed Jesus seems to be attempting the long jump – and failing pretty badly.)

'Exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before ...' In fact, both before and after his resurrection, Jesus says to his friends, 'I am going before you *into Galilee*.' But if I go on pilgrimage to Galilee, shall I see Jesus there, or shall I be any close to him than I could be in Wiltshire?

Alternatively, I could say piously, like some people, 'Jesus is present *in my heart*.' But if I say that, I could well be deluding myself: giving the holy name 'Jesus' to what is actually a creature of my own desires and fantasies; imprisoning him there, so that I can miss his real appearance over my shoulder, as stranger or as judge.

Ah – but are we not taught to find Jesus *in the Holy Bible*? And yes, there are those wonderful stories of him, there are his words recorded for us. But I cannot shut Jesus up in a book, any more than in my heart. And precious as his words are, *the Word of God* is something more; more glorious, more piercing. Where is its place?

Well, surely the answer to this search for Jesus' presence lies *right here* – here in what we are about to do at the altar, where the Church teaches that in bread and wine are the Real Presence of Christ. Yes, and what a privilege, what a joy to be in such intimate physical contact, to be fed by the bread of heaven ...

Yet still this Sacrament does not permanently *locate* the exalted Christ: not on the altar, nor in the tabernacle, nor on our tongues, nor in our hearts. For the bread is blessed, and given, and consumed – and then *dispersed in the world*, as we and

communicants everywhere are dispersed in our daily lives and in all our encounters with friends and strangers. The Body is broken.

'As you have sent me into the world,' Jesus prays, 'so I have sent them into the world.' His apostles are sent out – including, as we heard, the substitute apostle Matthias. And so are we sent out, the ones who he says 'do not belong to the world' but who are very much *in* the world. And so in the name of Jesus – as we remember and pray and give in this Christian Aid Week – so are sent out hope and training and food and tools and wells: the presence of Christ infinitely dispersed, ceaselessly saving.

'Exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before ...' In the Ascension reading we heard on Thursday, St Luke states that a *cloud* took Jesus out of the disciples' sight. Now the cloud is the symbol of the presence of God; but the symbol also of the unknowability of that Presence. For a cloud is opaque, but not solid. It cannot be grasped or held. It cannot be called any 'place', for a cloud does not stay still.

Any more than *the wind* stays still. And 'wind' in the Bible is the same word as 'spirit': the wind that blows where it will. For what we celebrate next Sunday, at *Pentecost*, is the divine Spirit, the rushing mighty wind, that great centrifugal force urging us, and urging the presence of Christ among us, into the entire *world*; that broken but glorious world that is our home, even if we 'do not belong' to it (that is, are not defined by it).

Where is Jesus exalted? He is there – he is not there – he is nowhere – he is everywhere. Absent, and present. Endlessly going ahead of us; eluding us; surprising us; embracing us; feeding us. So, as we prepare for Pentecost, we can pray with St Patrick:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all who love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.
Amen.

Christopher Burdon