

Sunday after Ascension Day

Collect: O God the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: we beseech you, leave us not comfortless, but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us and exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Acts 1.15–17, 21–end: In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, ‘Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.’ So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.’ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas.’ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Gospel Reading: John 17.6–19: ‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Reflection

“Fashion’s Leap of Faith”. This was the unusual news item back in 2018 that Rihanna, Kay Perry, and Lena Waithe had been dressed in church vestments for the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art annual fashion gala. And a reminder that the church vestments worn by a priest or bishop does also have its own industry behind it, the skills that are needed, the creativity it inspires and the employment it brings.

For Christianity white or gold are worn for the major festivals of the Incarnation, Resurrection and Ascension. Ascension is one of these major festivals because the ascension represents Jesus returning to the Godhead.

And with this also the reminders of the Jewish enthronement ceremony of the anointed king and the symbolism of the high priest returning to the holy of holies at the end of the temple rite of atonement.

The sacrifice of atonement had been made, forgiveness to the people proclaimed, and the people reconciled to each other and to God. The high priest then returning to the holy of holies through a cloud of incense going through the curtain of the veil.

The veil representing the second day of creation in the Genesis narrative; the separating of what was above from what was below, separating what can be called the holy place of our human living from what was then described as the most holy place, the mystery of our living within God's eternal presence.

Using these terms, Jesus' life and activity can be described as holy, lived out amongst ordinary people and living with their joys and sorrows, their hopes and disappointments. At Ascension we recognise that this holy time had ended but the eternal significance of his living and his opening up of relationship with God did not end and in this most holy, humanity does have a full share.

Furthermore, the old concepts of sacred priesthood that are associated with this, including the making of animal offerings, are now ended. It can be said that our great high priest Jesus has left people with the responsibility of being the way in which the great actions of the temple worship are now to be lived out in our human living.

The capacity to have compassion for all, to set aside prejudice and ignorance; the capacity to live sacrificially, not surrounded by the trappings of wealth, the love of money or by the need to acquire and make a show of material things; the capacity to bring justice where there has been deceit or cover up and disregard for the truth, the capacity to choose to forgive or to seek reconciliation even when that choice might be made following times of bitter suffering and grief.

The Church as Christ's living body and the human heart, mind and intentions, the place where God's indwelling is to be found so that we live as Jesus lived and can be as Jesus was. His justice, compassion and reconciliation now with us, to be lived out in what we say, think and do.

Margaret Barker, the theologian referred to in some sermons in recent months, makes a convincing case for the writer of John's Gospel having the disciples understand that Jesus is now to be found in the place most holy from the day of resurrection onwards.

In her "Temple Theology" this follows on from Good Friday as being the day of judgement when Jesus dies for us and for all people, and Easter Day when the meaning of the day of atonement is fulfilled, the demonstrating of God reconciling all people and for all time. Mary Magdalene in the garden, the first to comprehend and then with others to experience that joy we find spoken of, by Jesus, in these words in John's gospel.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete."
(John 14:27 and 15:11.)

Vestments are not items of fashion. They do though have symbolic value because they can represent what Jesus did, and so be a helpful way for us to understand better what it means to say and live out, that Jesus lives in each of us. That his love abides within, so that we can love and live as he lived and loved, and in this way making what we do holy, in our worship and in our lives in service to others.