

Easter 7 (Acts 1.1-11)

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We have been celebrating the season of Easter and this is the final weekend of that season – the 7th Sunday of Easter. Already, in fact, we are moving beyond it. On Thursday just gone we celebrated Ascension Day, which marks the departure of the risen Jesus from the sight of the disciples forty days after his resurrection. In the ritual time of the church's year, the resurrection appearances of Jesus are now ended – the disciples are waiting in Jerusalem for what is to happen next – their baptism by the Holy Spirit, which we will celebrate next weekend at Pentecost. This will mark officially the beginning of their ministry as Jesus' body on earth, their being sent into the world as his witnesses, and as bearers of new possibilities for human life. Traditionally, then, Pentecost is seen as the birthday of the church.

As a matter of chronological and historical record, some of this (I'm thinking particularly of the feet of Jesus disappearing up into a cloud) is difficult to swallow. As an expression of the *experience* of Christian conversion and transformation, however, these liturgical movements put us in touch with some of the deepest dynamics of the journey of discipleship, the deepest elements of our own transformation by faith. Because what is represented here is the transition undergone by the disciples from their knowing Jesus in a human way, as an *object* of their perception and separate from them, to knowing him through their participation in his life and the transformation of their subjectivity. This is a transition that we too are invited to make, a transition that is

integral to the fulfilment of our vocations to become fully human and bearers of God's life in the world. Tonight I want to explore something of this process.

You'll remember that the disciples' attempt to understand Jesus by way of their pre-existing categories died hard. We are familiar with the point, made over and over again by the gospels, that they could not understand Jesus' sayings, they could not interpret what he was doing – and a major cause of the blockage was their pre-existing theological framework. He spoke with authority, but he did not look as they thought God ought to look. He did what only God could do, and yet he did it among those who were, by definition, forsaken by God – the poor, the leprous, the lame. Jesus' essential ministry among them consisted of the seemingly impossible task of changing the lenses through which they perceived everything – God, themselves, other people – a task which he carried out by means of shocking and incomprehensible reversals of conventional piety. Pretty much blind to the last, the disciples experienced his crucifixion as a final defeat, 'we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel'; and his resurrection (when finally they recognised him) as the renewed possibility of the fulfilment of exactly the same expectation: 'is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'

So, as we have been seeing over the last few weeks, part of what is going on here is the continuing story of Jesus' challenge to and slow reconfiguration of the disciples' theological understanding. We thought God was like this, but actually ... Like any fundamental paradigm shift, it takes the disciples time and lots of mistakes to begin to get there.

There is, however, an even deeper dimension to this process of transformation, which emerges in the post-Easter period and is crystallised in our celebration of the Ascension and Pentecost. It is not simply that the disciples are slowly learning new content for the *concept* of God – where God remains an object to them, something

separate from them. It is that they themselves are being drawn into the very dynamic of God's life – so that they begin to see with God's sight, to understand with God's understanding, so that (as St Paul puts it) they begin to share the mind of Christ and live as Christ's body in the world. This is the utterly extraordinary proclamation of Easter faith – Christ became human so that we might become divine. We call it salvation (healing), transformation – the Eastern orthodox call it deification.

How does this happen? And what, really, does it mean? Often, the Holy Spirit is wheeled on-stage at this point – it is by being baptised with the Holy Spirit that the disciples come somehow onto the inside of God's life – God dwells in their hearts in the Spirit, and they are caught up in God, also in the Spirit. It is in, through and with the Spirit that the church knows Christ Jesus and shares his risen life. All this I believe. But for years I had no idea what it meant, no felt experience of it and no sense of any access to it. So let me have a go at unpacking this a bit.

The biblical tradition has always insisted that our thoughts are not God's thoughts. Any knowledge we have of God, is because God has revealed God's self; any true knowing of what God would have us do arises from our listening and obedience. God remains essentially mysterious – it is impossible from the human side of our consciousness to grasp God (or indeed ourselves) fully. St Augustine put it succinctly: 'If you can understand it, then it is not God. If you were able to understand then you understood something else instead of God. If you were able to understand even partially then you deceived yourself with your own thoughts'.¹

If we are to come to know as God knows, and love as God loves, then somehow that gift must come from God's side – we can't generate it ourselves. That is what Pentecost is about, and I'll say more about that next week. But in order to receive that gift, there is a passage we must make from this side. It is a passage of letting go what we

¹ St Augustine, *Sermon 52*, cited in Laurence Freeman, *Jesus the Teacher Within*, p.131.

thought we knew and the selves we thought we were, being drawn into the darkness of unknowing, a process of getting utterly lost. Laurence Freeman writes: 'Losing your way is the very way of seeking God. This truth about the vision of God reveals another law we may not even be aware we are obeying: that to find our true Self we must lose our ego selves'.²

We have seen how this process began for the disciples with the relentless confounding of their messianic expectations during Jesus' ministry, and was intensified by his crucifixion and their own loss of place in their tradition and community. The resurrection reawakens, perhaps, their flickering original hopes but the risen Jesus remains essentially mysterious – not what they expect. And then he leaves again. And at this moment, they are plunged even more deeply into confusion and unknowing. When they ask him about the restoration of Israel, he gives a non-reply: 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority' (Acts 1.7).

Teachers of Zen use a koan, an unanswerable, conceptually nonsensical question to break down the student's egoic desire to grasp the ungraspable, to master the mystery – which is always a block to the deepest seeing, Enlightenment. Jesus' life on earth, culminating in his Ascension, could be seen as an enacted koan – completely impossible to 'work out' at any human level, an invitation to contemplate and so to be transformed by the mystery of reality we can never adequately control or 'see'. Like the Zen teaching, the life of Jesus says: stop trying to know it in the way you think you need to know it, to hold onto it the way you want to – let go of your grasping mind and the self-consciousness that is inseparable from it. In unknowing, let the reality be given to you; let it change you.

All of us have our own version of the question: 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' Lord, is this the time when you will show me what

² Freeman, *Jesus the Teacher Within*, p.131.

my life is about? Is this the time you will give me the job I want, cure the disease I have, restore my fortunes? It is not wrong to acknowledge our needs and longings, to bring them before God. Indeed, we must do this. But deeper than what we think we want God to do for us, is what God wants to do for us – to give us. What God wants to do for us is to have us share in the power, the love, the wisdom and the peace of God’s own life – not as a possession but as gift, as empowerment, as freedom for living. Receiving this gift means letting go what is in the way – self-enclosure, self-separation, self-consciousness. It is therefore a way, essentially, necessarily, of unknowing which is synonymous with unselfing.

Jesus entered the cloud out of the sight of the disciples. The anonymous 14th century author of the treatise on contemplative prayer, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, enjoins us to relate to that cloud – not with forensic analysis, but with darts of love. Our mantra is our dart of love, and our consent to remain in unknowing and open to gift. We don’t think about God or Jesus, we don’t imagine what it would be like to be drawn more completely into the life of God: our work is simply to let go our thoughts, to rest in unknowing as a way of faith, trusting that even when it feels as though nothing much is happening, we are being drawn nearer, being changed into the likeness of Christ, and that, in the Father’s good time we will know even as we have been fully known.