

Sermon preached on Ascension Day, May 24th 2020 – the first Sunday in lock down on which we were permitted to live-stream services from Christ Church

I'm standing in front of the oak reredos with its carving of Christ and two angels. I have to say when I came into church yesterday to prepare for the service & turned the lights on, I saw the reredos with new eyes. We have had better lighting installed which is brighter and more directed so that for the first time we can actually see Christ in his Glory. Many of you know the history of the reredos, but for those who don't know, it was given to the church in 1904 by Mr and Mrs Paul Jolly, of Jolly's apartment store, and it must have been hand carved, at a time when traditional skills like oak carving were more common than they are now.

With the new lighting you can actually see the gold of Christ's halo & the halos of the two angels and the gold of the *mandorla* – that almond-shape of what seem like rays of light surrounding Christ. From the 5th century mandorlas have been representative of the light of eternity. You can see them in the mosaics in Ravenna where Christ and the blessed virgin Mary have an almond shaped 'full body halo.' It is related to the gold background which icons have. Both represent the uncreated light of heaven. The Greek orthodox also call it 'the light of Carmel,' referring to the mountain of the transfiguration when the blinding light of eternity made Christ's clothing look dazzling white and a voice spoke out of the cloud.

It's not clear whether our reredos shows the Transfiguration or the Ascension. Christ is surrounded by the light of glory - but his hands don't have the wounds which the resurrected Christ showed the disciples. That may be because the sculptor liked to think they had been healed at the resurrection. The alternative and probably more astute view is that his scars remain and there is, in heaven, a wounded man who like us, bears scars.

Actually, I'm not sure it matters whether it represents is the transfiguration or the ascension. What Peter, James and John saw at the transfiguration was a glimpse of Christ's glory, the same glory they had seen at the transfiguration and on each occasion there was a cloud. At the Ascension the cloud 'took him from their sight.' To the Hebrews, Clouds signified the presence of God. In the wilderness the Israelites were led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.¹ God appeared to Moses in the tabernacle as a cloud over the mercy seat.² 'In the year that king Uzziah died', Isaiah had a vision of the Lord in the temple amongst clouds of smoke.³ Christ in Glory is illuminated by the dazzling light of God's presence and yet we can't look directly at that glory. God is hidden from us by what we describe as cloud or smoke.

At the end of today's service we will sing: 'Christ triumphant ever reigning, prophet priest and king.' In the Eastern orthodox tradition Christ is shown crowned as king, enthroned on the cross. In our tradition, he is shown as a king on a throne - and you will see that image in the stained glass of Christ Church. But however we choose to portray him, the glory is overwhelming and Christ disappears from our sight into the symbolism of clouds.

The words of today's Gospel, which are some of Jesus' last words to his disciples before he goes to his death speak of that glory. Jesus is praying. He knows what will

¹ Exodus 13:21

² Leviticus 16:2

³ Isaiah 6:1

happen in the next few hours. Already, Judas has gone out into the dark to betray him. Jesus knows he will be arrested and executed- and he prays for himself and for his disciples. For himself he prays that God will glorify him in order that the Father may be glorified & seen to be glorified by the disciples.

I love the idea of being glorified - for the sake of someone else. I think perhaps that when you are in love, you dress up in your best clothes (and jewels) so that you look lovely for your partner. Is it something like that? A selfless love that rejoices in the happiness of the other? And the glory Jesus awaits is the re-clothing of his wounded body in resurrection glory. He goes on to say: says, 'I am no longer in the world but they (my disciples) are in the world.'

I was stopped in the street on Friday by someone I know only slightly - not a church goer - who asked if there was anything that needed doing locally - shopping, gardening, dog walking.... she had some time and was clearly longing to help someone - to be useful. That Godly impulse is put there by the Holy Spirit. As Jesus leaves his earthly incarnation, he leaves the apostles with instructions to continue his work on earth- 'I am no longer in the world, but they (my disciples) are in the world.' He has told them (us?) what to do and how to do it. To love one another, to love our neighbours and to be servants to one another.

I know many of you are looking after each other and after friends and family and neighbours with phone calls and shopping trips and emails and Zoom meetings. That loving, selfless service to others is part of the close relationship which Jesus speaks of having with the Father in which we can join. I don't think she realised, but in asking to be part of Jesus' life in the world, that person was claiming for herself the glory Jesus promises. Later in the same chapter he speaks of those who will believe through the disciples' words. That is we, the church, who through the ages have recognised his words and passed them on for 2000 years Today you may hear him say, .

'The glory you have given me, I have given them so that they may be one as we are one.'