

Sunday after Ascension

Acts 1:6-14, 1 Peter 4: 12-14, 5: 6-11 and John 17: 1-11

Mother Emma

On Thursday we celebrated the fourth great feast of the Church year – Christ's Ascension into Heaven.

Fr Christopher reminded us in his sermon that it is only through Christ's leaving of the disciples that his loving presence is no longer limited to a particular time or place but is able to be with each one of us, throughout the world and across the centuries. As Christ ascends, he promises the disciples that they will receive power by the Holy Spirit and that they shall be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. The confused disciples make their way back to Jerusalem, where they continue to remain hidden, but praying constantly that, as Jesus had assured them, the Holy Spirit would come upon them.

During these nine days, from Ascension on Thursday to the Feast of Pentecost next Sunday, we are also encouraged, as individuals and as a worldwide church, to pray earnestly for the blessing of the Holy Spirit. This may not happen with the drama of Pentecost, but through prayer we may become more conscious of the Spirit's presence with and within us as we go about our daily lives, and more easily recognise the Spirit's work in the world around us.

If we find it difficult to envisage what such a prayer might look like, the Common Worship intercessions for today pray for individual gifts, each of which is clearly linked in Scripture to the Spirit's presence. We are encouraged to ask God for power to proclaim his word; for wisdom in our interactions with others and with his Creation; for peace, so much needed in our hearts and in our global community; for healing; for specific individual gifts through which we may serve God in our own ways; for the fruits of the Spirit made manifest in our lives; and for the breath of the Spirit to inspire us and give us energy, hope and joy.

The fruits of the Spirit have been helpfully listed by Mother Alice around the walls of the children's chapel in the south-east corner of the church. Please do refresh your memories as you leave with the signs we might look for in our own lives, to see the Spirit at work in us.

One of the great joys of the St Mary Abbots annual calendar is the Confirmation Service, at which members of our congregations, who have been studying, reflecting and praying together over the past few months, come before our Bishop to profess their faith, and to receive her laying-on of hands and her prayer for the Spirit to come upon *them*. We are fortunate that this normally falls around this season, and especially so on Thursday, when it comes exactly as we are all thinking about the Spirit's coming.

It is a great blessing, and a sign of the Spirit at work in our church, that this year five children and ten adults from our congregation will join others from St Philip's Earls Court Road and St Mary The Boltons to take this important next step in their spiritual journey. Please may I encourage you to join us and support them, and to greet our new Bishop on her first visit to the parish. Even

if you can't be there, please pray especially for the Spirit to guide and sustain them on their Christian journeys. Their names are listed in the newsletter.

Perhaps our prayer for them might come from the words of Jesus in our Gospel reading today: *"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. Holy Father, protect them in your name."* Christ is aware that a commitment to him and to his Word may not be easy, and will depend on God's protection, comfort and nurturing, as well as an understanding of his eternal promise. Our readings today allude to this juxtaposition of suffering and glory. In our struggles, we know that God is with us, and not only in our struggles, but in those of the world we see around us, however bleak and desperate things may sometimes seem.

One of our Confirmation candidates very powerfully explained their understanding of the phrase "the family of God", when they said both that they encountered God within the family of St Mary Abbots, but also that when they read about the horrific persecution of Christians in other countries, they felt a strong sense of pain, because they identified with them as brothers and sisters in the family of Christ. St Peter uses the same phrase when he urges: "[Be] steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering."

Christians suffer in the knowledge that Christ suffered for us, so he might first to break the power of sin; then to overcome our fear of death and finally to be able to send the Holy Spirit in his place to inspire the church throughout all ages. We will all face sadness, pain, loss and fear in our lives, yet Peter assures us that *"the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you."*

In our faith, in our commitment to God and also to one another, we can help In God's work to reveal the Holy Spirit in the world. The disciples' faith was challenged again and again, by the Crucifixion of their Lord, by his unlikely return from the dead, by his disappearance into Heaven at the Ascension, yet the Spirit gave them the power to build up that faith through an understanding of the glory they had witnessed and the glory they were promised.

Our faith will also be constantly challenged – by those around us, by the sin, greed and selfishness we encounter in the world, by doubt and by fear and by both our own suffering and that of others. Yet Peter encourages us: *Rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings; so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.*

Amen