



S'Marylebone  
Parish Church

# Sunday after Ascension-Day 2021

## 11am Choral Eucharist

The Lord is not short on words in today's Gospel. What a contrast from just a few weeks ago when Jesus stood (also in St John's account) before Pilate. You remember, He was questioned and said nothing. Pilate asks 'what is truth?' and Jesus' silence is unforgettable. We know of course what He meant – 'what is truth?' You are looking at Him Pontius.

By complete contrast here is a *long* discourse. Today's Gospel is just a chunk of the even longer 'Farewell Discourse' St John records Jesus as speaking immediately after the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper and before His arrest.

Some scholars suggest that Semitic rhetoric of Jesus's time performs like a *helta skelta*: circling through the ideas and all the time forming the core central point. Others suggest the rhetorical convention is like a mountain – a long run up to the main idea which is clearly placed *bang* in the middle of the address, then a long run down further emphasising it. Both are very different from our own conventions, but either way the core of Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in this Farewell Discourse seems to be:

'But now I am coming to you [Father], and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves'

Jesus prays to the Father of going home, and then of His joy being made complete in us. No wonder these words are given for this Sunday after Ascension Day and the one before Pentecost. Do you see?

Christ's Ascension was not an abandonment but an unfolding. At His Ascension, Christ (body and soul) went to heaven. That means he has opened the way for us human beings (body and soul) to find our home their too. Where Christ has gone before, a way has been made for us to follow. Good news!

And this is an unfolding, not an abandonment even more so because Christ's Ascension paved the way for the descent of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of joy, of love, of power, of creation and life itself – God's Holy Spirit was poured out on the Church at Pentecost and that has remained the case ever since. We *now* are in the age of the Spirit as we await Christ's coming again. And in the meantime the

Church, the Scriptures, the Sacraments of Holy Communion, Baptism and Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination, Confession and Anointing are all works of the Spirit – it is the Holy Spirit who does all these things. When we pray, it is the Spirit praying in us. When we love, when we feel joy, when we feel empathy, or hope, or care – these are works of the Holy Spirit in us. Even our very existence moment by moment is a work of the Holy Spirit, who breathed the universe into being at the beginning and has been doing so ever since.

So perhaps that is why at the heart of this most important of prayers Christ speaks of going to the Father and that being the *completion* of our *joy*? Because by His departure we have the confidence that *we* will truly *belong* in heaven – He has gone to prepare a place for us. And that He has sent His Spirit to abound in life and love and grace. So this *is* good news.

But it would be easy to say, ‘how nice’ and wander off into the week picking back up our cares and worries and everything else. And that is hardly ‘complete’ ‘joy’ that Jesus speaks of. I have that feeling whenever I finish a Wes Anderson film. I love his films, but whenever the film is over I’m rather sad to find myself in the real world rather than in the film still.

That’s not real joy. Christ didn’t come to give us a pleasant distraction for an hour on a Sunday morning, or escapism from the real world. He came that we might have life forever in God and *begin* to live that life *now*, with joy, complete in Him.

So what are we to do? I suspect the answer lies in our celebration of the great feast of Pentecost next Sunday...

The Holy Spirit who dispatched the Apostles and the Mother of the Lord and those gathered with them across the known world, with the power to speak to every nation, and *filled with a joy* and hope and a love that even difficulty and trial, torture, imprisonment and bloody death could not quench. The Holy Spirit who didn’t give them a secure pension plan, or three square meals a day, or an affordable foreign holiday twice a year, or the guarantee of health or wealth or success at work or distracting telly and a good novel or anything else that *we* spend most of our time seeking, and finding what passes for happiness in.

The Holy Spirit led them in a path of joy that looked quite, quite different. Perhaps gently, simply, insistently this is where we should be looking to understand where true joy is? Where true purpose is? ‘What is truth?’ What is real? What is this all for? And what does this actually mean for my life and yours now, today, tomorrow? Where is *joy* really to be found? Gently, simply, persistently we need to ask: ‘Come Holy Spirit’.