

**Sunday after Ascension Day – 21/05/23**  
**Acts 1:6-14, John 17:1-11**

Let us pray:

Christ our lover,  
to whom we try to cling:  
as you have reached into our depths  
and drawn us to love you,  
so make us open, freely to let you go;  
that you may return in unexpected power  
to change the world through us  
in your name, **Amen.**

In our Gospel reading today, the word *glorify* (and its variations) is used six times. Its repetition struck me, and when we read it alongside the ascension story in the passage from Acts, it's a word that feels hard to ignore. I wonder, what do you think when you hear the word, *glorify*?

In a biblical context, it generally is used to mean *to honour, to worship, to magnify, or to extol* someone or some *thing*. It seems to be how Jesus is using it in our reading from John, as both honouring God and returning to God, however I want to focus on what this word might mean for us and our understanding of glory in our own bodies today.

I am somewhat ashamed to admit that when I first read the lectionary readings assigned for this Sunday, my image of Jesus ascending to heaven and lifting up his eyes to God was not the Jesus I normally pray with. When you think of Jesus, who do you see?

My Jesus has a body that I don't really think is gendered, is sitting in the earth, dirt under their fingernails. My Jesus dances late into the night with flushed cheeks, laughing when they miss the last train home. My Jesus always remembers to put the bins out and squeezes my hand when I'm nervous. In the words of Janet Morley whose prayer I began with, in lots of ways, Jesus is my lover, in whom I try to cling.

The Jesus of the Ascension story however sat uncomfortably with me, the initial depiction in my head was of a white (western European) man, flowing auburn hair and beard, crisp white robes, a six pack, beautiful feet, a glint in his eye, defying gravity whilst flanked by two equally beautiful angelic men holding the disciples back. It's a bit like this picture you can see in your order of service, painted by John Singleton Copley.

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As I studied this picture more closely and read the passage from Acts and from our Gospel again, I started to realise that the problem I was having was not just that I'd automatically thought of Jesus as White, but by extension that in order for him to be glorified, in order for him to be Christ, he became something other, no longer *real*, no longer human. My culturally dominant thought of perfection became a figure of Jesus so abstract; he could only be crafted by oil on canvas. Where did his grubby nails go? What happened to his sweaty beautiful marked and scarred body? The glorification in Acts and John which is subsequently interpreted by Copley becomes our normative Jesus, and I think it takes away the intimacy of the Christ that I know and love, no longer accessible but estranged from all that makes me and us who we are. I wonder whether the disciples initially felt like this too, that only after 40 days of the miracle of the resurrection, their lover was to be taken away from them before their eyes, transformed into something else entirely, and left with the unexplainable mysterious knowledge that they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit at some point in the future. To a confused group of believers, wrestling with some of the hardest theological questions that we still can't fully answer, what could Jesus even mean?

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And then, as I wrestled myself, I started to question whether I was reading these passages simply at face value, looking up to heaven and asking, *where have you gone?* Instead of looking at the path ahead, and witnessing the glorified *Jesus, our Lover*, as still there with us. What I mean by this, is that, although Jesus returns to God in heaven, he doesn't abandon us, or becomes distant. It is fundamentally different to Copley's portrait, because he takes our humanity with him. The ascension reminds us that our destiny is also divine, and that human nature and God's nature are not opposites, rather they co-exist together. This may sound odd, especially as we are learning alongside each other about a story when Jesus is supposedly lifted up into the sky, but Christ's humanity doesn't disappear along with his body, as John says in v10, *'All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.'*

For too long, in our western form of Anglican Christianity we have been taught that the problem with ourselves is that we are too human, too sinful, too bodily, a deeply harmful asceticism that blames our bodies for the stories they tell. I want to challenge that, because Christ came to teach us stories too, stories that aren't always easy but help us to access what is deep inside, that in order to be closer to the divine, we need to become more human. If we are fully human, just as God has made us to be, then it follows we're divine as well, just as Jesus both on earth and in heaven is fully human and fully divine. If we're made in God's image then it's when we are most truly ourselves, when we are most human, that we most truly reveal God's love and glory within us. Isn't that what Jesus did? Isn't that we're called to follow?

I despair that the Church can sometimes get this so catastrophically wrong, teaching people that Christianity is there to make you less human, not more of who you are. Jesus teaches us that faith is about entering into abundant life, to become one with God by facing who we are truly called to be, but so often it doesn't look that way. I feel a physical pain that so much of Christianity takes people's agency away, harms them, tries to tell them they're less than, or not worthy of love because of their humanity or of who or how they love. What a scourge on our collective Body when we dehumanise the stranger or the friend in our midst. What an injustice when we make Jesus into an idol of white supremacy. What a sin when our siblings no longer come to church because the damage and abuse they've experienced has made them think they are not worthy of love.

In the Gospels, even in our Acts story, and right at the very end of today's passage from John, when he says, *'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one'* we see that the humanity of Jesus was rich, full, totally opposed to any form of dehumanising structure and religious bigotry of the day. He was open to every kind of person, he laughed, he danced, he cried, he sat alone. He didn't narrow life down into one kind of way, but glorified humanity by enriching it, enhancing it, and reminding us that to be holy is to be completely ourselves. He helped people to feel at home who would feel completely out of place in our churches today, all the people on the margins, all the people on the outside who wouldn't dare to enter in because they're afraid of the reaction they may receive. He sat with those who felt confused, lost, unsure, those who

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carried their hurting hearts in their hands, looking for another way. Here is Jesus with the grubby fingernails, glorified, simply seeing people who they are, beautiful, siblings in Christ. Here is Jesus of the second picture, by Gerald Griffin, surrounded by humanity at all ages and stages of life. Here is Jesus, ascending into heaven, rising in glory, as the Great Liberator, our Lover, our beautiful friend.

I end with a poem by Jay Hulme,



*O Lord, show me how  
to love,*

*How to form my body  
like water  
against the skin of  
another.*

*How to hold my heart  
in my hand,  
how to offer it to  
another man;  
how to say*

*I love you so much  
I would risk the whole  
world  
just to hold you*

*Show me how  
to embrace all that You  
made me  
in the image of all that  
You are.*

*How to delve deep  
inside my soul,  
how to see myself  
whole;  
how to witness in all of  
this love*

*The unblemished work  
of God. **Amen***