

Christ Church, Bath

Sunday after the Ascension

21 May 2023, 10am

Preacher: Canon Simon Tatton-Brown

Acts 6.1-14. [1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11], St John 17.1-11



Ascension Window
St Swithin's Church, Bath

Glorify your Son, so that the Son may glorify you.

St John 17.1

Watching the Coronation service a couple of weeks ago, I did wonder what many people will have made of it. Yes, they were awed by the spectacle, the pomp and ceremony, the

glorious music and all the rest. But what about some of those arcane rituals? The Anglican liturgy, the bowing and scraping, the anointing all hidden behind screens, the acts of homage?

The other day I was at a concert in St Swithin's (part of the Bath Festival) and sitting in front of the east window I found myself wondering what some of the tourists, looking in on the church, made of it? Particularly tourists from a different culture and religion. Jesus, inches off the ground like a human hover-fly, with a drone-like coronet a long way off head. Why wasn't he wearing it?

One of the ways we humans have to convey abstract thought is through art and symbols. It's how Jesus got his teaching across: in parables and conversation, often with references to what went on in the temple at Jerusalem. He could be confident that his hearers were familiar with what the rites and ceremonies all meant. Just as he'd visited the temple as a child, or had been to school

in the village synagogue in preparation for his coming-of-age Bar Mitzvah at thirteen, so had most of them. They'd experienced the clouds of incense issuing forth from the Holy of Holies, they'd sat at the Passover table in their homes, they'd grown up with the reading of scripture.

But when the church moved out into the Gentile non-Jewish world, the preachers and evangelists could no longer make those assumptions. The problem became even more acute after the destruction of the temple in AD 70, and the final break with rabbinic Judaism that followed.

It's not just the symbols were being forgotten. Some of them could easily be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Like what happened here after the death of Princess Diana when the Queen left the royal standard flying at full mast over Buckingham Palace. She knew that the standard represented the presence of the monarch. (She had even taken the precaution of taking one to Kenya in 1952 when her father was ill so that she could fly it

from the cockpit of her aeroplane if she had to return to London as reigning Queen.) But in 1997 most people no longer remembered, and the royal standard signified to many a heartless lack of respect.

That's one of the reasons why the early church developed the catechumenate, and refused admission to the sacraments to new Christians until they had undergone three years of teaching and mentoring. During those three years they learned about the meaning of the rituals into which they were to be admitted. They were taught their meaning, and by becoming familiar with the scriptures they also learned the back stories of how the symbols came to be.

I think the BBC did a pretty good job in doing this for the Coronation. There were plenty of programmes and news reports in the build up to the day, when news reporters and commentaries spoke about (for instance) how the rituals dated back to Saxon times and the ceremony of 973. And the same on the day, though it wasn't easy to do this

without interrupting the music and the ceremony itself.

So how would the author of a guide book to St Swithin's handle the east window? Well, let's look at the picture. It may not be the greatest art, but the artist has done their best to make it a teaching aid for those who (like us) would like to be in-the-know.

Right at the top there is a cloud, which in first-century Jewish thought represents the Shekinah, the presence of God. (Think of the cloud at the Transfiguration for instance.)

Towards the bottom of the cloud, but still very much within it, is the crown with which the risen and ascended Lord will be crowned on his triumphant return to his heavenly throne – a throne that, by the way is invisible to us mortals, in just the same way that there was once a throne in the Holy of Holies which was invisible to the worshippers in the temple because it was hidden behind the Veil.

Then you see Christ. Triumphant. A faint smile on his lips and in his eyes. Is he standing in the traditional Hebrew position of

prayer? Or do his outstretched arms signify welcome? Perhaps both. He's robed as a priest. Interestingly not as a Jewish high priest, but as a Christian priest, in alb, girdle, and cope. (The chasuble I'm wearing was derived from the cope.) But he's also the crucified Christ. Look (like Thomas was bidden to) at his hands and his feet.

He's not standing on the ground though. He's on his way to heaven, shortly to be taken from our sight as he enters the Shekinah and heaven. Left behind on earth are the Eleven. They haven't yet taken in what's happening. That will happen as they reflect later, linking what they have just seen to what Jesus had taught them earlier, and of course all they had experienced before. But one of them at least is already going down on a knee, in worship, adoration and praise.

One last detail. Have you noticed what's beneath Christ's feet? It's St Swithin's, the church building. A statement if ever there was one, about who reigns here.

When Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables and symbols, he almost never told his listeners what the stories meant. Sometimes he didn't even finish the story. Wouldn't we love to know, for instance, whether the Prodigal Son's older brother was ever reconciled to his return? That's for us to work out, not in finishing the story for Jesus, but finishing it for us – by forgiving our sisters and our brothers when they upset us, by loving our heavenly Father with all our heart, and our neighbours as ourselves.

And isn't that what our discipleship is all about? The reading we had in the gospel was from Christ's High Priestly prayer at the Last Supper. He opened his prayer by asking his Father to glorify the Son. I began by asking what he meant. All I can do now is tell you what it means for me.

For me, to experience glory can be to experience the sort of emotion described when people talk about an act of worship which has really meant they felt the presence of God. The best example in Scripture that I

know is when the prophet Isaiah (in chapter 6) was present at the enthronement ceremony of the High Priest 'in the year that King Uzziah died', 'and the house was filled with smoke' - incense. He knew his unworthiness, but that's also when God (via the seraph) touched his lips and gave him his commission. What glory means for you; well – that's for us all to work out in our own lives, for ourselves.

But there was one thing that the coronation ceremony made quite clear to King Charles. It was that the authority he enjoys as King doesn't come from royal descent, or even the will of Parliament (though both of these may be necessary as our laws at present stand). It comes from God. Which belief may well lie behind his promise that King Charles comes, like his Saviour, not to be served but to serve.