

WITH US
Sermon for Easter 7B (Sunday after Ascension)-Jn 17:6-19
LPC, 5/17/15

God himself is with us. That's what we just sang. Do we believe it? Do we act as if we believe it?

Perhaps we are less likely to claim God's presence with us than people were in a previous age. In fact, a lot of historical claims of God's presence we might discount today. The Spanish conquistadors believed God was with them as they set about subjugating the native peoples of the New World. Both North and South believed God was on their side in the American Civil War. Look, even the Islamic State insists God is with them.

It is probably useful to distinguish between "God is on our side," and "God is with us." To say God is on our side seems to be what gets people into trouble. The concept of God being on someone's side is problematic even in Holy Scripture. We are told God was with the people of Israel, but the Bible also tells about plenty of times when God did not take their side in war or conflict. God was obviously with Jesus and the saints, but did not defend them from persecution.

God being with us is apparently something distinguishable from God being on our side, as we often understand that expression. And is God, in fact, with us? Some of you are able to answer that question with a confident "yes." I know this from the interviews that my team and I conducted last year as part of my Congregational Study. To protect confidentiality I will paraphrase some of the answers to the question, "Who is God for you?" and present them anonymously.

- "God has always been there to pick me up when I've been down, me and my family both. I have no doubt he will always be there."
- "God is ever-present in my life."
- "I find God everywhere. He's what gets me through."
- "God rides beside me when I drive my car."

If you had an uncertain reaction when I asked "Is God in fact with us?" please observe that for many people with whom you share this time and this space, with whom, in fact, you share the bread and wine, the answer is an unqualified yes. If God is with your neighbors, and you are with your neighbors, God is with you.

How is this possible? How can God be with so many people at once? Once upon a time Christ was with a specific community of people at a particular time and place in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. So far as we know, God has not been with us in quite that way in two thousand years. Yet we believe that Jesus Christ is indeed with us today.

The church explains this to some extent in the doctrine of the Ascension. Jesus' Ascension, we say, took place forty days after his resurrection. It's described this way in the first chapter of the book of Acts:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Ascension is considered a major feast of the church, on a par with Christmas and Easter. Check out page 15 of the Prayer Book if you don't believe me. Yet for some reason we don't have Christmas and Easter crowds on Ascension Day. Perhaps things would be different if commercial interests could find a way to profit, maybe by having Ascension Day sales or offering photos to be taken at the Mall with the Ascension Angels.

Part of the problem is that Ascension, occurring forty days after Easter, is always on a Thursday, and is on a different date every year. Nevertheless, Ascension is so important Jesus himself thought it more noteworthy than the resurrection. It's true!

Remember when Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene in the garden and she thinks he's the gardener? What does Jesus say to her? "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Not "Go tell my brothers I am raised from the dead," but "Go tell my brothers I am ascending to the Father."

By Jesus' own prioritization, Ascension is something to which we need to pay attention, and it has to do with God's presence among us.

To be incarnate as a human being, God had to be bound to a particular time and place, as humans are. And so Jesus was. To show once and for all that every aspect of human life is precious to God, Jesus had to suffer and die as humans do. To show once and for all that love is stronger than death, Jesus had to rise from the dead. In order to bring this message of salvation to all people regardless of time and place, Jesus had to ascend to the Father.

The Gospel of John makes clear that this is really a re-ascension to the Father, with whom the Son existed before all time. The Book of Acts makes clear that the Ascension is associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus goes up, the Spirit comes down. Next week we'll talk about the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

All this means that although Christ is no longer present among human beings in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Christ can now be present to all people through the power of the Holy Spirit, unfettered by time and space.

But the bottom line is, God is with us. God may be before time and forever, but God is also with us now, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Ascension makes this possible. I invite you to look again at Hymn 475. This is a very good prayer to end with:

God himself is with us ... God is here within us.

*Come, abide within me; let my soul like Mary, be thine earthly sanctuary.
Come, indwelling Spirit, with transfiguring splendor; love and honor will I render.
Where I go, here below, let me bow before thee, know thee and adore thee.*