

At the beginning of term I had a phone call from a man in Australia who wanted to speak with someone about the Prophecy Project set up by my predecessor Jane Shaw. I was about to hand over her details when he indicated that the message was quite urgent because he was sure he had calculated the date of the apocalypse and he needed to pass on this information to a higher authority. Thankfully I haven't heard from him again, although I was reminded of him today when I found three closely typed pages in my pigeon hole from a man in Devon who is sure that he is the little child that will lead us from Isaiah 11.6. There are, sadly, many people out there whose lives seem so chaotic that they will hold on to even the slimmest possibility that they might have some insight into a divine plan for the world. Life may be falling apart around me, but at least I know who the antichrist is.

I think Jesus's disciples, gathered around him in Bethany, would have had some sympathy with those poor deluded seekers of the apocalypse. In the past forty days everything has changed around them: their leader has been arrested, tried, crucified and buried, and yet somehow has risen from the dead and come among them again, eating their bread and their fish. Nothing they thought they knew seems to be true anymore. It is no wonder the disciples want reassurance that Jesus is still in charge, that he is going to restore the kingdom to Israel and guide them into the new age, as they have been hoping all along. It must have seemed almost cruel to them when he dismissed that hope, and, without even a fond farewell, was lifted up from before their eyes, slipping away somewhere else. The beautiful Westmacott marbles above the altar behind me have him receding back into the marble, gliding away from us back into the unknown. Only the right hand raised in blessing is fully in relief.

This isn't, unsurprisingly, a moment the church likes to repeat anymore. In most parishes Ascension is celebrated half-heartedly, by the faithful few gathered on a Thursday, or is replaced by folk rituals, the beating of the bounds or the singing around a spring. To honour Ascension truly, as we honour Christmas and Easter and the other major religious feasts, we need to think ourselves back into that moment, to remember what it was like to stand with Jesus at Bethany knowing that nothing was ever going to be the same again. To do so would require us to acknowledge, like the disciples, that we may not be sure where we are going, or even that we've got things wrong. How much easier

to celebrate the hope of Christmas or the joy of Easter. Even the despair of Good Friday is simpler than so much uncertainty.

And yet, that moment in Bethany is where we often find ourselves, looking for some truth to cling to as our certainties recede before our eyes. It is where our society finds itself, knowing the truth about global warming and global poverty but with so many unwilling or unable to see, and no clear plan for the way ahead. It is certainly where the Church of England finds itself, with dwindling, aging congregations and seemingly endless tawdry conflict about women and gay people that everyone wants to get past but no one is able to transcend. And in your own life, if you are not at this moment in Bethany, you have almost certainly been there before, when you failed to get that job or that place at university, or discovered that someone you trusted was untrustworthy, and the path you thought you were taking together has disappeared from before your eyes.

It's a perilous moment, as you'll know if you've been there. It is so tempting to make a very bad decision: to cling on to the old ways, refusing to see what has changed, to run after a new, inferior leader, to give up the whole thing in despair. Ascension reminds us that God is there in those moments, for us and for our society, as God was there for those first disciples who would become the church. If they were willing to wait, if they were willing to trust, just a little bit longer, if they were willing to turn their faces from Jesus's receding feet and open their eyes for God's presence among them, then God's potential would burst out, and a little band of disciples would grow into a faith that spread across the known world. For the disciples, that meant resisting the easy options, and opening their minds to extraordinary change. It meant letting go of their old status as Jesus's special friends, and accepting that the spirit would be poured out on women and men, on Jew and Gentile, on people of every race and nation. For ourselves, it means a willingness to accept that we are not in control, and a the resilience to trust that the brave new world will be a better one than what came before.

More than once the early church would nearly disintegrate as new leaders rose up and forced them to relinquish their treasured identity, to be Christians instead of Jesus's friends. But because they were brave and bold and willing to follow the spirit on a new path, something remarkable was born. May you know the same faith and courage the next time you find yourself in Bethany, and may God bless our church and give us the audacity to be the Christians we are called to be.