

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, 9th May 2021



Dear Friends,

‘While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.’

(Acts 10: 44)

I wonder what Ascension Day means to you? In our Christian calendar we are set to celebrate the glorious ascension of Christ into heaven this coming Thursday, 13th May. In our Benefice, we have a scheduled service of Holy Communion to commemorate this event at 9.30am at St Catherine’s Church in Littleton, and at 2pm at St Mary the Less in Chilbolton, we have the funeral of Sybil Compton, a faithful soul and active village elder of ninety-five years standing. For me these two occasions are not incompatible. Overarching all this, Thursday, 13th May marks the first day *‘Thy Kingdom Come’* - a week of prayer by Christians across the world devoted to encouraging others to know the love of Jesus in their lives.

But where are you in your head and your heart as you read these words? Have you already booked your seat at St Catherine’s? Are you indifferent to the feast day? Have you committed to driving across the benefice to the service? Will you personally be committing your life anew in the power of the Holy Spirit, to live and work as dear Sybil and many other beloved family, friends and neighbours have done, in loving service to others to the glory of God?



‘The Disappearing Feet’ from a 15th Century manuscript illustration

Last Sunday, John's Gospel set out Jesus' loving promise of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who will be with all those who give themselves in faithful and fruitful service to God. This Sunday, we hear Jesus teaching the disciples again going deeper into the heart of what sort of 'fruit' He wishes us to produce in His name.

John's narrative pace is escalating. This is no mild-mannered and gentle Jesus, quietly sitting by a balmy shore-line enjoying a Sunday afternoon bible study class. No! This is the commanding voice of Jesus, passionate in his instruction to all who would have ears to 'go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.' (John 10: 16-17)



'Ascension' by Barb Carr

Jesus, at the end of His earthly life, is pulling no punches. He is clearly telling His followers to love one another in faith and in deed. Just as He is about to demonstrate by giving His own life in love for the world, so Jesus tells us this service before God is likely to be costly for us too. Committing to being followers of The Way will mean disciples having to make serious choices in their lives. The love being asked of us is not superficial or self-serving. It might even mean it costs us our lives.

Perhaps you might think, in the historical setting of Jesus' incarnation and ministry at a time of insurrection against oppressive political rule, desperate poverty, starvation, sickness and hopeless instability, it was all too understandable that people might risk following Jesus. They had nothing to lose, right? But what happens if we ask that same question in our world today. Are His commands for us to follow Him and to love one another as compelling for us?

In my view we have never been in greater need of Jesus' presence among us.

We live in a fragile world, beset by frighteningly similar socio-political scourges to that which Jesus and His disciples experienced. Yet in our contemporary times, the zeitgeist suggests we can get through these difficulties very well without God. However, if this modern perspective holds true, how is it that so many people are searching for spiritual and emotional peace? Why is it that accumulating material wealth and possessions just doesn't bring people the happiness these 'things' profess to deliver? How is that so many people are lonely in the midst of a crowd, hungry in the throes of a banquet, thirsty at the bottom of a bottle and longing to lay their heads at the feet of an unconditional love that will soothe their very souls?



'Ascension' by Anish Kapoor

Forty days after Easter, Christians celebrate Ascension Day, remembering that Jesus returned to His Father and left His disciples waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower them for their new mission of spreading the Good News of Jesus throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth.

After the very first Ascension Day, the disciples gathered with Mary, constantly devoting themselves to prayer while they waited for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Like them, our reliance on the gift of the Holy Spirit is total – on our own we can do nothing.

Great art imagines Jesus *'powering off'* from the ground like a rocket and disappearing into the clouds, with the disciples watching as His feet eventually disappear from view. Yet, what actually happened is a great mystery – Jesus' return to His Father, as described in the book of Acts, tries to put the experience of the disciples into words that would be understood in the First Century.

All we can know for sure, is that Jesus is with us now in Spirit, and He is with His Father also, waiting for the day when He will return at the coming of the Kingdom, with all its blessings, for all eternity: *'Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of Him. So shall it be! Amen!'* (Revelation 1:7)

Through the centuries Christians have gathered at this time to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. 'Thy Kingdom Come' picks up this tradition.



Jesus ascending into heaven by William Brassey Hole

This year, *'Thy Kingdom Come'* will be slightly different – hoping to be a blessing to the Church by serving through prayer where need is greatest. Whilst not losing its heart for evangelism, during this concentrated week of prayer, *'Thy Kingdom Come'* will provide an opportunity for churches to engage and connect with those who have struggled with church at home during the pandemic and with those who have drifted away from their faith over the years; to inspire and encourage those who have been part of the worshipping community pre-Coronavirus and continue to be so; and those who are new to Christianity and who have found an awakening faith in Jesus beginning to blossom.

Are their people in your family, at work or in your local community for whom you wish to pray? If so, make space in each day to pray for that one person or group of people – try not to become overwhelmed with too many! Maybe two or three, not more than five is a good rule of thumb! The prayer doesn't need to be complex or long. Perhaps you might not even have words – just imagine that person in your mind and ask the Holy Spirit to be with them. This prayer might bear fruit quickly or unexpectedly. Or it might not feel as if your prayer has had any effect at all. Don't give up! As Christians, all we are asked to do is lift people in prayer and trust Jesus to work in their lives. Sometimes I know I have been praying for someone for a long time, years even, and it feels as though I have not been heard. And then, I hear that person has found faith, in extraordinary circumstances which could not possibly be connected to me ... yet I know the seed of my prayer will have germinated with the prayers of many others, in the blossoming of that person's life in God's mysterious timing. Alleluia!



The Ascension by John Singleton Copley

True faith is costly, it takes courage and grace to truly reach out in love to another. This Ascension Day, let us pray together and work together in faithful hope for the coming of the Holy Spirit this Pentecost. Let us pledge to pray fervently for the spiritual growth of our faith community in The Downs Benefice. And let us also pray for ourselves – that we have the strength to see the need for change in our lives to allow the Holy Spirit to move and work – both in our own hearts and in our places of worship.

Almighty God, while it is a great mystery to me,
I believe that Your beloved Son,
our Lord Jesus, ascended to heaven to be with You once more.
Help me, therefore, to seek Your dwelling place
with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and so continually dwell with You,
with the Saviour and with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Yours in the mystery of Christ,

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Service Schedule

All services are at 10am with the exception of the Ascension Day Holy Communion which begins at 9.30am

Please contact the Benefice Office on 01962 880 845 or office@downsbenefice.org.uk to book a place at any of these services.

Please remember to wear masks.

Date	Chilbolton	Crawley	Littleton	Sparsholt	Wherwell
9 May		Holy Communion			Morning Prayer
13 May			Ascension Day Holy Communion		
16 May			Morning Prayer		Holy Communion
23 May	Morning Prayer		Holy Communion + APCM		
30 May				Morning Prayer	Morning Prayer
6 June	Morning Prayer	Morning Prayer			
13 June				Holy Communion	Morning Prayer
20 June	Holy Communion		Morning Prayer		
27 June		Holy Communion			

Collect for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

God our redeemer, you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.



Acts 10: 44-48 - Gentiles Receive the Holy Spirit

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, or they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

John 15: 9-17 – Jesus Commands Us to Love One Another

Jesus said: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.'