

It was animated, what was said. Emails were exchanged. The discussion was about the paschal candle that you see here. I didn't think we should have it here today, because in the Church of England, the paschal candle is lit for 40 days to mark the period between the Resurrection and the time of the Ascension, which is what we're celebrating today, the 40 days that the risen Jesus walked on the earth, and then it's taken away. In the Episcopal Church apparently, the paschal candle stays up until Pentecost, which we're celebrating next Sunday to mark the continuation between the mission of Jesus and the mission of the church energized by his spirit.

You could tell by the fact the candle is still here who won the argument, but I'm going to take the opportunity of having the final word and to tell you why it is that the English version of what's to be done is actually to be preferred. I like the fact that the candle goes away before Pentecost and after Ascension because it marks a gap. I think it's important to recognize gaps. Gaps seem to be an important part of life. I'm living in a big gap at the moment, the gap between the work of remodeling our house starting and before it finishes. That's quite a big and painful gap, but we're aware that we have to go through it. I wish we could all go straight from A to B, from B to C, from C to D, but it doesn't work like that. There are always gaps in life.

The in-between times are part of life. Actually, I've noticed that between times are often worse than other times. For example, I've noticed when people come to see me when they're ill and they've been to see a doctor and they've had tests, but they're waiting for the test. That's often when people are at their lowest. It's a harder time in many ways than seeing the doctor and getting the test results, even if those test results are bad because, at least, then you know what you're dealing with. You're not in a time of uncertainty. You're not between the times. You're not in a time of unknown and waiting. It's those waiting, unknowing times which are so difficult to cope with.

As we celebrate today the Ascension of Jesus, we're in that gap. We're about to enter the gap between Ascension and the Pentecost Festival of

next week. Jesus says to his disciples, "Stay here until you have been clothed with power from on high." In other words, they were to wait, wait in Jesus until the Spirit comes. That's what Jesus is saying to them. But he didn't tell them how long they were to wait. They were just to wait till they were clothed with power from on high. They were in a gap, the space between. The disciples were in the space between the absence of Jesus as he ascends into heaven, and his presence as he returns to them by his Spirit at Pentecost.

I want to explore this between time, the things of the absence and the presence of Jesus that's before us at this time in the church's year. So, first, absence, the absence of Jesus. Jesus told the disciples that it was good that he leave them so that he could send his Spirit to them at Pentecost. Jesus said in John 16, "I tell you a truth. It is to your advantage that I go away for if I do not go away, the Spirit, the advocate, will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." That must have been a difficult message for the disciples to hear because we always prefer to hold on to what we know. It's always hard to be separated from those whom we love. I feel I get some sense of how the disciples must have felt when I pray frequently. I'm aware when I pray of the absence of Jesus. I often, but not always, feel that there's nobody there when I pray. Who's listening to these prayers?

But as I say, that's not always the case. How would I recognize the presence of Jesus if I wasn't very familiar with his absence? Why would I seek God if he was always present? It's the absence of God that makes that yearning for him, that makes us seek him, that helps us to recognize him when he blesses us with his presence. Jesus was absent from the disciples as he ascended to take his place at the throne of grace, at the right hand of the father. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it in our reading, "Jesus, the Son of God, passed through the heavens." I think it's worth noting then that the writer to the Hebrews uses Jesus' human name to describe he who sits at God's right hand. He doesn't say the Christ or even Jesus Christ or any such similar title. That's no accident, because the writer to the Hebrews wants to emphasize the continuity between the human Jesus, the Jesus of

Nazareth and the Jesus who has passed through the heavens. They are one and the same.

Look how he goes on. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every way, every respect, has been tested as we are yet without sin." At the Ascension, Jesus lifts off humanity to the highest place in heaven. The one to whom we pray is familiar with our human experience and condition, an amazing thing picked up by our Hymn writers. Later we'll be singing this as the Hymn writer described that mystery, "Thou has raised our human nature on the clouds to God's right hand." In our final hymn, it's put more simply, more bluntly, "Man with God is on the throne."

I had a wonderful colleague once who illustrated this by picking up a detail in the gospel story. It's the detail about the hands of Jesus. The hands of Jesus are mentioned in this Ascension story. It says, "He lifted up his hands and blessed." The hands of Jesus are mentioned in an earlier gospel story. Do you remember after the Resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples and Thomas wasn't there when Jesus first appeared to them and he doubted. How does Jesus help him to overcome his doubts? He shows him his hands. Because what's on the hands? The scars. The wounds of his crucifixion are still on Jesus' hands. So we can assume here that as Jesus lifts up his hands and blesses the disciples, they are still bearing the scars of his crucifixion.

Jesus was taken into heaven bearing the marks of his suffering. The human experience of Jesus was taken up into the Godhead. God knows how we feel. There is no aspect of our human experience with which Jesus is not familiar. We pray to one who understands. That's such a deep and profound thought that I've nothing else to add. So I'll move on instead to talk about the presence of Jesus. At ascension-tide, we anticipate the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So next week we'll be hearing another reading from Acts, the one about the disciples being in the upper room and the Spirit comes on them as tongues of flame. They go out into the streets of Jesus speaking in different

tongues and preaching with great conviction.

At Pentecost, the promise of Jesus I mentioned earlier is fulfilled. Remember what Jesus said? "After I'm gone, I will send the Holy Spirit, the advocate, to you." In this way, Jesus was present with his disciples through his Spirit and it's still the case that through the Holy Spirit, God blesses his people with his presence, that he doesn't leave us as orphans or alone. This presence has a transforming effect. I was reminded of this very vividly last week. During our remodeling, some people have been kind enough to lend us their houses for us to stay in as we seek to escape the dust. Last week we were staying in somebody's lovely home on the 16th green of the country club. As many of you know, I'm working on my golf game. I'm beginning to show signs of improvement thankfully. I'm practicing hard. It was terribly frustrating to look out of our kitchen window over these beautiful fairways, this green I could have chipped onto from the garden and not be able to play.

I was very well-behaved. I did think of just that no one might notice if I'd nipped over the back wall that was about knee high, but I was worried about being banned. Not that I'm sure you could be banned from a club of which you're not a member, but perhaps I was worried about the repercussions for the people whose house we were staying if I was seen nipping over the wall, playing on the 16th green. So each night when we had our G&T, we had to sit on the back wall and look over these beautiful verdant fairways. Then on the last day, a golf buggy pulled up at the bottom of the garden with a friend onboard, who was a member, and he took me in the buggy and we played the back nine. It was wonderful. What I couldn't do on my own, I could do when I was accompanied.

That's the Pentecost message: the difference that the presence of Jesus makes on our lives as he accompanies us through life's journey. The Spirit, the presence of Jesus gives us the confidence to do what we couldn't do on our own. The presence of the Spirit of Jesus still transforms his people and the Spirit leads us to places where we couldn't go on our own, left to our own devices and resources.

As Hebrews says, "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness." It's the Spirit which accompanies us on our journey which allows us to follow the new and living way that Jesus has opened up for his people.

I've got one final word about the presence of Jesus. We see in the story that Jesus has come to the disciples by his Spirit whilst they were still confused and still unsure of what was going on. In that gospel reading, the disciples asked Jesus if he's going to restore the Kingdom of Israel. They've been with him for three years. They've been through the crucifixion, the resurrection. Jesus is about to be ascended and they still don't know what's going on. They're still asking the wrong questions. They're still asking for a political message and restoration. They went back to Jesus completely unsure of what was going to happen next.

Then the Spirit came. God doesn't wait to bless his people until they've got everything sorted. They don't have to understand everything, all the great mysteries of the Christian tradition, before he blesses them with the presence of his Spirit. The gift of the presence of Jesus is for all believers. It's to only ask. You could ask this morning. I'd love to pray in the chapel with anybody who wants to receive the gift of God's Spirit, to know his presence with us in our lives. So next week, when you come to church, it will be the feast of Pentecost and the paschal candle will be there finally for the last time, but don't let that fool you into thinking that we move seamlessly from Ascension into Pentecost. Don't forget there's been a gap. There's always a gap, but God is in the gaps, too. We might feel his absence but the presence of Jesus is always with us by His Spirit.

Amen.