



Rev Diana Rattray
Liminal Space

1 John 5: 9-13

John 17:6-19

Year B Easter 7

16 May 2021

In the liturgical calendar we are in the liminal space between Ascension and Pentecost. The Oxford dictionary defines Liminal as relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process or occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.. The word derives from the Latin Limen – meaning threshold.

Thursday was 40 days since Easter. Many churches celebrate the Ascension, when we are told that Christ ascended into heaven and left his earthly ministry. Then ten days later God's sent God's spirit to the disciples at Pentecost, which we celebrate next Sunday, 50 days after Easter.

That all sounds fine if you have a theology that includes an understanding of heaven, and a tiered hierarchical world.

However you view Ascension and Pentecost, I think these ten days are a time to think about our faith and how it is lived out in our daily lives. This time of being on a threshold.

The disciples would have been at sixes and sevens, grief at death, disbelief at resurrection, confused as Jesus leaves them again. What in the world was happening?

In today's readings there is talk of being in the world but not of the world. Perhaps that is an easier concept to understand.

The concept of "world" here, is not talking about the created order—rocks and trees and animals and things like that.

Rather the concept of world is human society organised as it sees best to promote its own purposes.

It is a world which goes about business as usual; society, culture, human institutions doing what they usually do.

The faith lens helps us to see the priority of the world differently. We are asked to stand out rather than fit in.

Whether it be the way we stand up against the economic exploitation of workers, or take a stance on climate action or call for peaceful resolution between Israel and Gaza and an end to interfaith intolerance.

Amongst other identifying features, people of faith should be seen as different, set apart, because their focus is not just on themselves but also others. Of course this is not unique to people of faith but surely our faith helps to motivate our actions.

Sometimes our faith position, and who we are, sets us apart from business as usual and that can result in others responding with anger, ridicule, or even hatred. I know I have had more than my share of ridicule, hatred and abuse based on being an out, married, lesbian priest. That has come both from people outside the church but more commonly from those who are very vocal about their Christian faith. I, in turn, have to check myself so that I don't make judgemental or hurtful responses in return. If I truly want to live out a liberal, inclusive faith then there needs to be room for people of all faiths, beliefs and none.

This time of liminal space, between Ascension and Pentecost, is a time for us to think about faith in action.

Perhaps we have been so caught up in our culture, our society, our economic framework, that we have forgotten what sets us apart as people who have faith in Christ.

In our gospel today Jesus prays on the eve of his crucifixion. The world is not a friendly place and is threatening not only to Jesus but also his

disciples. The writer of John is somehow seeing the world as something that needs to be rejected – that we should somehow ignore the physical and mortal dimension of our lives. His reality was that his community of believers were rejected by friends, neighbours and those who worshipped at the synagogue because of their belief in, and following of, Jesus and his teaching. So for John the world is seen as a dark place.

For many the world may have felt like a dark place these last fourteen months or so. People whose parents or children have died from Covid-19. Medical workers in India and Nepal hit by the second wave of Covid with inadequate supplies of oxygen and other health basics.

The families in Gaza who have suffered from Covid as well as violent attacks on their homes. The increasing injustice amongst those who do not have resources when the world lauds consumerism, wealth and possessions. To name but a few.

Yet within the gospel account there is also a lot of giving highlighted in this farewell prayer of Jesus. The God recorded by John is a God who delights in giving. Jesus prays to a God who reaches out in embrace. Who has an open hand to give and give and give when people turn in faith. For nothing in the world or of the world can withstand the grace and mercy of God's gift of love.

It is in that love that Jesus' disciples and the writer of John keep on moving on, bearing witness to the one who lived among them in grace and in truth. It is in that love that we are encouraged, strengthened and sent out to be in the world, not of the world. It is in that love that we are to survive, not to be damaged, but to flourish, to be sharing, to continue giving.

The disciples were in a hostile world, there was a temptation to give up and there was certainly growing disunity. Perhaps that resonates somewhat for you too. Despite Jesus' prayer, divisions came and

continue but surely that is better than unity for the sake of unity. We cannot live with a concept of unity that is everyone always being nice to everyone, because then the tendency is for exchanges to become dishonest for the sake of unity. Nor can we live in an environment where conflicts are not tolerated and are pushed underground.

True love is making a place where conflicts can be dealt with and worked through and even lived with but in a way which is not destructive for any party. This unity is a eucharist vision of peace and justice together now. It is not something that is easy to aspire to given the fragmentation and disunity the Christian church in its many forms portrays to the world and is the reality in which we sit.

As we sit in this liminal space, these ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost we hold the tension of being in the world and not of the world. Of having visionary ideals and being part of a far from perfect Christian church. We also sit in the knowledge that all of this is held within the promise of love – a perfect love that dispels all fear, all unbelief, all hatred.

We need to know that,
the world needs to know that.
I finish by repeating the words of our collect this morning:
God unheld by word or wall;
power of love
lift us from dullness and cynical contempt;
make us ready for your Spirit of transforming fire;
and turn our hearts to the mending of the world;
through Jesus Christ, the name above all names.¹
Amen.

¹ Steven Shakespeare