

# Christ Church *Sermons*

Seventh Sunday of Easter – The Sunday after Ascension Day, May 4, 2008 –  
The Reverend Nancy J. Allison

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10; 1 Peter 4:12; John 17:1-11

## *The Wide Screen*

Back in the days when cinema theaters were first installing super-wide screens, movies were sometimes made that would begin deceptively on a, still, small screen. The opening shots were often done in black and white. But, after a few minutes, once the setting and the characters were established, the theater curtain would roll draw back to reveal the full width of the proscenium arch. There would be a significant pause, then, the screen would erupt into a New World of wide perspectives and vibrant color. You all remember the Wizard of Oz. Well, it was magic! A story that had been conceived only in a small and limited way was suddenly vast in its dimensions. It had the effect of carrying the audience into a world of unimagined glory.

In a way, the New Testament tells its story with the same technique. Christian faith begins on a tiny screen. We can put it in miniature. There's a Christmas crèche. There's a young couple with their donkey, a tiny swaddled child, and around them the little town of Bethlehem. Even later, when the child becomes a man, the setting is not much larger. There is the lake and its fishing boats, the hills with their sheep. The focus is almost always on a small band of men and women. Even at the end, for all its horror, the screen is small - three ghastly crosses and a dwindling crowd.

But, then, comes the significant pause; then, the pregnant silence of God's power about to be unleashed, and in an instant, the curtain is drawn back to reveal the dimensions of a cosmic stage, and we are confronted by Glory. The earth opens in resurrection; the skies blaze with the power of ascending victory. The insignificant band of men and women, who were once so no-account, are welded together by the fire of heaven. They grow into a vast, unnumbered community that goes forth into all the earth. And the One who has been the focus of it all, the tiny baby, swaddled and lying in a manger, He is now seen for what, in fact, he has been all along - "The image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation." He is "The Christ" in whom "all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell", the Cosmic Savior, who having known our human condition in its joys and in its sorrows, now carries that humanity back into the heart of God.

In most Orthodox churches of the East, the architecture, itself, tells this story. At ground level the frescoes or mosaics depict the world with its endless variety of animals and plants. Slightly above, but intermingled with them is realm of humanity – earthly life with its common people and rulers alike. The scenes of the Gospels come here, for they are part of the earth, part of the work of Jesus in his total humanity. Above them, come the saints – those who are still in the world, but are not of the world – those who take their life from the eternity of God. John, in the Gospel lesson today, says they are ones who do the will of God and, thus, have begun to realize eternal life. Above them all, surrounded by his angels and his saints, at the very center of the over-arching dome of the church, is the Cosmic Christ. Christ Pantocrator – the One by whom all things all things are made – the One in whom all things are redeemed – the One with whom all things find their unity and their completion. Always, he holds up wounded hands in blessing – a blessing that falls down upon the whole of creation – a blessing and a prayer that is

calling the whole creation upward into the heart of God. If you stand in such a church, you can almost feel the energy descend, filling and empowering the worshippers for their upward task of bringing all things home to God.

Our own Ascension window (which I can see better than you) says much the same thing. The wounded Christ blesses his disciples as he is taken out of their sight. The marks of the nails are fully visible in his hands and his feet as he takes our humanity, with all its glory and all its pain, into the fullness of God. Here, in our window, Christ wears priestly robes to signify that he is not only Lord of all, but that he is the Great High Priest, the Great Intercessor of all. Just as he offered himself for us on earth, going to the death of the cross, now, he continues to offer himself for us through constant prayer. The doctrine of the Ascension is not that Christ is absent from us, but that he is totally and profoundly present. At the heart of God, at the heart of Life, Jesus prays for us. That ought to be a source of continual hope and strength for our lives. We are not alone, Christ is with us. We are not abandoned, Jesus, himself, strengthens us for every step of the journey. We have a Great High Priest who unites our little prayers and our small sacrifices to his great prayer and his one great sacrifice. The Cosmic Christ opens the way, back to the heart of God, for all humankind. This Feast of the Ascension, which we celebrated on Thursday and continue to celebrate throughout this week, ought to be known as the Feast of the Wider Vision; The Celebration of The Super-Screen View of Life. It takes us out of our own limited insight and makes us Players in a cosmic drama which is filled with Hope – the Hope of Heaven and the Hope, for all humankind, of sharing the Glory of God.

I wish I could say that we are filled with such Hope, but probably the most apparent thing about modern life is the lack of Hope. For all its glitz and glamour, modern life is almost synonymous with lack of vision. It is a technology driven enterprise that has no sustaining or embracing truth. Most people are reduced to the role of mere consumers of material goods. They choose a very subjective, small-screen lifestyle rather than seeing themselves as participates in the Cosmic Vision of the Ascended Christ. Such lack of vision locks people up within comfort zones of their own making. It causes us to see the world only from our own perspective. It makes us fearful of the adventure of life. It is lack of a wider vision that pits Christian against Muslim, Israeli against Palestinian, Rich against Poor, Race against Race. All these things are nothing more than the symptoms of a small-screen view of life. They are signs of a limited, blinkered existence that simply cannot see the Eternal Embrace of God spanning the whole of cosmic creation.

Today, in the Gospel of John, Jesus prays for us that we “all may be one, as he and the Father are one” – One in heart – One in purpose – One in vision – One in bringing humankind back to the Eternal Life of God. Throughout my lifetime this verse has been used to inspire unity among the churches. The Ecumenical Movement took as its motto, “That they all may be One.” It was a movement born out of the horror and the division of war, and people believed that only a united church could give the spiritual foundation for the new world that was coming into being. Well, nothing could have been a greater failure. The church has utterly failed to lead humankind to greater unity. Most churches remain small-screen enterprises. The God they worship is a tribal god concerned only with their own local interests. This is true even when the god they worship is the god of “inclusion,” or the god of “liberation,” let alone the god of biblical fundamentalism. I don’t really want to comment on the remarks of a certain former pastor of a presidential candidate, but only to say that he is hardly alone. For the last fifty years the theology of the church has been driven by self-serving interest groups. We not only have liberation theology and black theology, but feminist theology and gay theology, along with the usual rich, white people theology. This is not the unity for which Christ prays and the fault can

be laid squarely at the feet of the leaders of the churches. I read something recently in an Episcopal Church publication that really caught my attention. Let me give you the whole quote: "Think about it," the writer says. "Denominational Leaders are the only folk who have a vested interest in Christ's body staying divided. The "Oneness" for which the Ascension begs is what happens in spite of current church authorities. Only the laity, it seems, has the leverage to be faithful in this way to the Ascended Lord." I think that's right on. The true unity, the wider vision of humankind is not going to be won in the sanctuary. It's going to be won in the world. It's going to be won as ordinary believers take the Hope of Christ's upward call into their hearts so that we can see this world, in all its complexity, unafraid; that we can reaffirm not only a common creation, but a common destiny as human beings.

The prayer of Jesus is that we all may be one. That's not politics. That's the Cosmic Vision of God. We live in turbulent times, with many competing forces fighting to put their small screen view of life center stage. But, at the juncture of such turbulent times stands the Ascended Christ, blessing us with outstretched arms and bleeding hands; calling us to come higher up and further in to the mystery of God. Wouldn't it be a great thing if, in our lifetime, the curtain pulled back a little further and we would open our eyes to see that wide screen view of life.