

Evensong Sermon, Jesus College Chapel, 30th April 2017
Psalm 110, Daniel 7.9-14, Ephesians 1.15-2.10
‘At the right hand of the Father’

Living at one point in a college chaplain’s house, on one occasion a fresher walked into our living room, and practically burst into tears, announcing, ‘I haven’t seen a sofa for six weeks!’ It wasn’t just the sofa, of course – more of a sense of missing home comforts, not feeling at home yet in her college room.

‘There’s no place like home’ so the saying goes. And while all of us here are old enough and wise enough to know that home can be a difficult, painful place for some, for those who are fortunate enough to have a loving home, I think the saying hits the mark. There is no place like a home where you are loved, where you are known and where you can be yourself – not needing to pretend, or to seek to impress, or to worry about what people think. When you are at home, you belong.

I wonder where you feel at home? If I asked you to describe your home, what would it be like? In the town or in the country? A grand palace – or a more humble dwelling place?

There’s certainly something grand about the description of Jesus’ position at the right hand of the Father. The letter to the Ephesians describes it as ‘far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.’ God has ‘put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’.

The creed tells us that ‘he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the God the Father almighty’ – and the images which come most easily to my mind are ones of power and of glory and authority. Jesus’ work on earth now completed, he ascends to his position as Lord and King.

But to think of it in another way, at Ascension, Jesus comes home. This is his ‘homecoming’. Jesus ascends into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father – seated in the place where he belongs.

This is where Jesus is truly at home: at the right hand of the Father. Here he is known and loved, and knows and loves – the incarnate Jesus, fully divine and fully human, drawn into the divine presence.

On earth, Jesus has been misunderstood and maligned, betrayed and denied, condemned and crucified. It's all there in the creed: he 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.'

At Easter Christians throughout the world celebrate the next line, remarkable perhaps for its matter of factness in the face of the extraordinary truth: 'the third day he rose again from the dead.'

But it's in Jesus' ascension into heaven that the movement of incarnation is in some sense completed: Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. The picture here is of Christ in his divinity occupying the place that rightly belongs to him. But because of the Ascension, the picture now includes Christ in his humanity finding his home here: at the right hand of the Father. This now is where Jesus belongs, where he is at home, fully divine and fully human.

Jesus is at home.

'There's no place like home' we say. And yet sadly for many people, there is no place to call home. For a whole variety of reasons, people find themselves without a safe place, without a place to belong, without a place where they feel secure and loved.

Jesus has such a place: at the right hand of the Father. And the Christian truth contained in the story of his Ascension is not just that he has such a place, but that we are offered a share in that place.

In Ephesians we not only read of God raising Jesus and seating him at his right hand, but we also read of God raising us up with Christ, and seating us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

It's the ending not just of the movement of incarnation: Christ coming to earth to die, to be raised, and then ascending to the Father. It's also the end, still in the future for us, of course, of the story of our salvation: that through baptism we die with Christ, that we are made alive in him and that we are raised to be seated with him – to be where he is, our human selves like his in God's own presence for ever. The promise for those who trust in Christ is that he will one day bring our humanity, with his, into God's own presence for ever – that he will bring us home.

I've had various different homes, and Jesus College is one of them. Coming back to a place where you once lived is not always a good idea. All kinds of different memories of my time at college fill my head. Some great times, some interesting maths – which I have not made so very much use of since I left –

some rowing disasters. Some romantic disasters too – or at least at the time they felt very disastrous. A previous chaplain welcomed me to her kitchen table and mopped up tears on more than one occasion. At times when I felt far from my home, she gave me a space which could be like home: where I could be loved, comforted, known.

And as much as I learnt lots here about maths, I learnt much too from her, and from others, about offering ‘home’ to others. Out of the abundance of God’s love for us, we are called to love others. Out of the security of knowing that we have a home with him, we are called to offer others, as far as is possible, a place where they can be at home – perhaps only for a brief moment, but home nevertheless. We are called to love people, to know people and accept them for who they are, to let them belong.

Our current home is a vicarage, and I guess I would say that we do our best to welcome people into our house, and to make them feel at home, with varying degrees of success. The moment a potty-training toddler wee’d on the handbag of someone attending a confirmation class was not our finest hour.

But we keep trying, and I urge us all to keep trying. You might not have a vicarage to open up to others. But we all have something to share: a moment to chat with someone who is lonely. A kettle to make a cup of tea for a stressed out finalist. The opportunity to include in an activity or event someone who too often feels excluded and sidelined.

We all have physical homes of one sort or another – whether it is a college room or flat, a family house, for those who are really grown-up! a house to call your own. Those who have a home can speak up for and call out to those without homes. We all have the means to email a politician, speaking up for those who are homeless in this country, or who are refugees or migrants and far from their own homes – feeling like no-one has noticed or cared.

We all need to find the places where – and the people with whom – we can feel at home, be known, be loved, have a space to share how things really are for us. And in turn the gift we have of safe time and space is a gift we must try and share with others, whether directly with those around us or through encouraging provision for those further afield.

It makes all the difference in the world to have a home.

But the deeper message of the Ascension – ‘he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty’ – is that our real, true home is with God himself. Just as Christ comes home to the Father, so we have a home

there too, and one day will go home to him. His homecoming makes possible our homecoming: humanity is given a place with God, Jesus belongs there, we do too.

‘There’s no place like home’ – we can know that we do have a home, with God, and whatever befalls us in this life: the good, the bad, the mundane, the tragic, the mistakes as well as the successes: we have a home, and one day we too will have a homecoming.

‘My life is hid with Christ on high’ says the hymn. How much more courage do I have to face the world because I know that the place where I really belong is with Christ and in Christ, in the heavenly places, at the right hand of God. Whatever else may be taken away from me, that cannot be taken away. Whatever happens to my earthly home, to the earthly things that give me security, to the people who love me and know me; whether I succeed in getting the exam results I long for and the job of my dreams, or things don’t quite go as I’ve planned; my life, my identity, my value, are safely held by the one who has a home for me in heaven.

I have a home with Christ in the heavenly places, and that too is something to be shared: to call out to others, so that they might hear about God’s love, and know the promise of an eternal home, which can never be taken away.

‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.’ (Ephesians 2.8)