

Sunday after Ascension 2023 (Worcester Cathedral)

Every week my phone tells me how much time I have spent on it. A little notification pops up and despite inviting me to click on it I simply swipe it away and ignore it. I do this because once I made the mistake of tapping it and looking deeper. It told me how many hours and minutes I had spent on social media, email, websites, games, and leisure apps. If you want to depress yourself instantly simply let your phone tell you how you have wasted your days.

There is no escape. Outlook sends me an email every week telling me how much time I have spent sending emails and – and this to me is the worst part – it then tells me how I can carve out time for myself by scheduling in focus time for four hours each day. It would be a dream. It would be a luxury. It isn't going to happen.

The difference between the email use and my phone use is one of focus. Emails – however frustrating some of them may be, are an essential part of working life. We can use them more wisely and monitor our time online but ultimately it is part of how we work. The phone apps on the other hand are a mixed picture. Some usage is important: checking the weather, the news, a message. But much of what I discover is that I have a habit of simply checking my phone, discovering nothing has come up, but instead of switching off I am tempted into social media or a game or a useless trivia trek on Wikipedia. A recent Ofcom survey found that the average person in Britain checks their phone every 12 minutes.

This relentless checking is a disturbing trend. It speaks of restlessness – not the restlessness that comes from boredom necessarily but restlessness which comes from a deep longing, yearning, hunger for connection. As is so often with our worst habits, vices, and bad behaviours, there is an underlying cause which is in itself good. Finding affirmation from our phone is shallow, but seeking connection, completeness, wholeness – is deeply positive. It is where we find it that matters.

Ascension moves us into this place of satisfaction and wholeness. For forty days we have basked in the glorious light of the resurrection; coming to understand the benefits of new life, new hope, new glory. As we come to the end of this festival the Church teaches us, through the Ascension, how we might continue in this feast in the day-to-day ordinariness of the rest of our lives.

We are in the last days of the liturgical Easter season – the period between the fortieth day when Christ ascended into heaven, and the fiftieth - the day of Pentecost when the Church receives the Holy Spirit, the comforter and so itself becomes the Body of Christ. The in-between time, the time of waiting, the time of restlessness. We don't know much about this time of waiting from the biblical narrative: Mark and Luke tell us that the disciples went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, that there was great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God.

But I wonder. Were they as confident as these few hints suggest? Or were they restless, fidgety, restive? The apostolic equivalent of checking their phones every 12 minutes? However confidently the gospels end with this vigorous ministry of evangelism I am tempted to think that the waiting game, the long, ten days between Ascension and Pentecost were an uneasy time for the disciples.

Uneasiness – in terms of restlessness and impatience are, I think, common feelings within faith. The spiritual space between the certainty, perfection, and solidity of the Church's doctrine, and the day-to-day realities of a faith which doubts, falters, and at times struggles for clarity, this space is a spiritual tension for us all. The in-between, restlessness of Ascensiontide is not only our reality much of the time though, it is also a place of fruitfulness if we embrace it. It is this restless place which St Augustine wrote about from personal experience and personal benefit: "*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.*"

Restlessness comes from a longing for union, communion; whether with one another or most fundamentally with God. This union is a good thing to want and yearn for, it is the foundational energy of our relationship with God – yes because it demonstrates our movement towards God, but also because it reveals the presence of the Holy Spirit already within us, whose life groans and longs and aches for our response to the Divine love. Restlessness is part of our faith because it shows deeply how our hearts are made for love and for connection with the God who creates us and sanctifies us.

Now if we are restless and check our phones every 12 minutes, what might it be like to embrace the restlessness of our hearts and check our connection with God every 12 minutes, or dare was say, every life-filled second with our whole being?

This is again at the heart of Ascensiontide. The collect for Ascension Day invites us to lift our heart along with our mind to the place of heaven where Christ has gone before, so that with him we may continuously dwell. Lifting our hearts will ease their restlessness, as our hearts are raised to the realm of heaven - the realm of God for whom and by whom they were made. It is a discipline to be encouraged but a discipline which needs great attention.

The collect speaks of our hearts and minds ascending. We spend a fair bit of time on the latter: our minds are lifted when we think and reflect, when we read and study, when we pray and worship – not least because we associate our minds with our brains and we use our cognitive processes – however frail or feeble they may seem – to lift, albeit struggling, our minds into the realm of God. But what of our hearts? How do we raise them up, above the worldly distractions which bog us down. Training our heart is a harder task than training our mind.

Hearts are multi-taskers. On the physiological level they pump our blood and keep us alive; symbolically they are the source of love and

compassion; sentimentally they present romance and amour; culturally they signify the centre of all things. All of this suggests that our hearts deserve to be cherished, trained, and valued.

The Bishop of Oxford, Stephen Croft writes, *'In the Hebrew Scriptures, the heart is much more than the physical organ which pumps blood round the body. The idea of the heart is a big idea. In contemporary culture, the heart is the seat of the emotions and especially the place of romantic love. In the Bible it is much more. The heart is the very centre of our inner life, our spiritual life, our emotions, our character and our will. The heart is the whole of who we are and how we are.'*

No wonder St Augustine writes that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. This Ascensiontide we are called to respond to the risen Christ with our heart and mind – in our mind because we acknowledge that Christ is King, seated at the right hand of the Father, but in our hearts because as he ascends so he takes us with us. This is no mere physical movement at this stage of our earthly lives, but a movement of the heart – setting our hearts in heavenly places.

'Lift up your hearts' we hear at every Eucharist; 'we lift them to the Lord' we reply with faith and thanksgiving. The Eucharist is the training ground for the exercising of our hearts: in adoration, in thanksgiving, nourished by Christ himself, our hearts are trained and strengthened for life itself. They may remain restless, but they will strengthen until that day when finally they are lifted to the Lord in the fullness of his heavenly presence, and then, fulfilled and crowned, we will reign with him in glory, restlessness resolved and hearts content.

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