

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



## ASCENSION DESTINY

21 May 2023

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Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

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This is a big year if you are a Whovian. 2023 is the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr Who. Trailers for the Dr Who specials were released just before the Eurovision Grand Final. Making it even more a night of alternate realities. A Whovian friend has a theory. When she can't find something, its because time travellers from the future have borrowed it. They are creating a museum in the future and sometimes borrow objects from now.

If that puts your head in a spin, try thinking about time and God. We experience time moving in one direction: yesterday, today, tomorrow; last year, this year, next year. For God, its Everything, Everywhere, All At Once. Long before science fiction, St Augustine talked about how God lives in the eternal present. God is outside time. For God there is no past, present and future. Eternity is a single moment and one moment is the whole of eternity. Bewildering? God lives in the eternal present. It's a dizzying for us, but for God all things are now.

Dizzying for us, but we get a sense of this eternal now when we pause and notice: in a place of great beauty or in a enormous landscape or being transported by music or a place where the deep history is felt. Pause – rather than being caught up in the minutiae of life. Pause to sense the greater reality in which we live and move and have our being.

This morning's Gospel reading may leave you dizzy.<sup>1</sup> Jesus prays to the Father, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed." "the glory I had in your presence before the world existed." Jesus the time traveller? Not exactly. Jesus in the eternal present? Yes. This is Jesus in John's Gospel, remember, the Word in the beginning with God – the life and light of all people. It is "how the early Christians felt about their encounter with Jesus. His life was so saturated in divinity that it gave new meaning to humanity. Jesus' humanity was so shot through with divinity that it changed everything they knew about being human."<sup>2</sup>

The great feast of the Ascension was on Thursday when we celebrate how "God became like us so that we might become like God." Those are the words of St Athanasius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. God created us so that we might share in the life of God. It's central to Christianity, though it takes a bit of back seat in western Theology. Its much more prominent in eastern, Orthodox Theology. Indeed for Orthodox Christianity, our divine destiny is central to how faith is understood. Theosis is the technical word. And its here in this morning's Gospel reading from John. "All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ... Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

This changes our understanding. This morning's Gospel says "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Eternal life is not just what

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<sup>1</sup> John 17.1-11

<sup>2</sup> ["God became like us, so that we might become like God." – Emmanuel Voices](#)

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happens after you die, if you believe in Jesus. Eternal life is a deeper reality that comes from participating in the life of God now – in the eternal present. We are drawn into the life of God – sharing in that life as Christ does, rather than observing unworthily at a distance.

What does this theology mean for our day to day lives? Awareness of the eternal present affects how we relate to events and people. Rowan Williams has put it like this. “The things and persons of this world are seen in a new way, seen as charged with hope, with a future of glory and healing. They are seen as already part of the new heaven and new earth in which God’s purposes have been brought to completion.”<sup>3</sup> “The things and persons of this world are seen in a new way”. We can see the world as God sees the world. Living eternal life now means living with a sense of hope and goodness and trust. Living with an awareness of the greater reality in which we live and move and have our being – and that inspires a life of gratitude and healthy humility.

We can practice this way of being. The other day I was driving home after a meeting and was feeling anxious. For a while I ruminated about things. And then I noticed the hedgerows and remembered God’s presence. The issue I had been worried about was still there, but my anxiety lifted as I reconnected with God’s peace. It’s a way of being that we can practice in prayer every day. With practice we learn to remember what lies beneath and above and beyond. Through practising gratitude and trust and surrender, our sense of God’s peace deepens, and we inhabit more fully the mystery of God. We can learn to live out of gratitude and let go of fear. This is not about never being afraid, but knowing that fear is not the whole picture.

As we wait for Pentecost:  
O Spirit of God,  
set at rest the crowded, hurrying anxious thoughts  
within our minds and hearts.  
Let the peace and quiet of your presence  
take possession of us.  
Help us to become open and receptive to you.  
You know our inmost spirits,  
the hidden unconscious life within us,  
the frustrated desires,  
the unresolved tensions and dilemmas.  
Cleanse and sweeten the springs of our being,  
that freedom, life and love may flow  
into both our conscious and hidden life.  
Lord, we are open to you,  
waiting for your peace, your healing and your Word.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams in *Open To Judgement*

<sup>4</sup> George Appleton