

I've always wanted to be a perfectionist but never quite managed it. For example, I would like my study to be really tidy; the books in order and the filing cabinet properly organized - not just stuffed with bits of paper under 'p' for pending.

As a failed perfectionist I do try to implement an important condition of being a perfectionist and that is never to start a new task until the others are all completed. We had a neighbour once who had a grand idea of what his house should look like and so spent all his time starting his latest project, knocking down a wall here, stripping wallpaper off a wall there until the whole house looked like a building site. It drove his family to complete distraction, although it made me feel that my own efforts at perfection weren't so bad after all.

So, I have come to the realisation that being a failed perfectionist isn't such a bad thing. I'm sure Freud was right that certain forms of perfectionism can be extremely unhealthy, especially when, as he would call it, the quest becomes 'obsessional'; that is when everything has to be done 'just so' or else one's world collapses.

Real perfectionism I think only comes through knowing your limitations and in addition having the ability to enjoy one's achievements for what they are.

Strangely enough I think this is what the Christian teaching on Jesus' Ascension is all about. I say 'strangely' because the Ascension could so easily lead us to gaze abstractly into heaven rather than return to the practicalities of the world. The two angels say as much to the apostles:

Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking towards heaven? (Acts 1:11)

Ascension works in several ways: it is a metaphor of transformation and perfection; it marks the end of one story about Jesus and the start of a new one; it is a vision or goal for us as a community to aspire to in the building up our lives in Christ.

So let's see how St John, St Luke and St Paul each offer us their insights into these different aspects of the Ascension.

St John considers that the Ascension is a continuous process whereby Jesus is 'lifted up' onto the cross at his crucifixion; 'lifted up' at his resurrection and 'lifted up' when reunited and glorified with the Father. So, for us living 'in the world' being 'lifted up' is also the way in which we aspire to transform ourselves and the lives of others by having a vision of perfection and of what each one of us and our world could be.

For St Luke in his Acts of the Apostles, the Ascension is not only the completion of the story of Jesus' life and ministry but also the start of a new chapter with the birth of the Church. We see this in the very first church group immediately after the Ascension where the apostles along with Mary and many women disciples, all gather and worship in the same Upper Room where Jesus had celebrated his last supper with them.

Luke teaches us an important lesson: Jesus' resurrection is not merely a one-off great event of the past, but rather through the Ascension, a continuing reality *now* in the ongoing life of the world-wide Church.

This is where St Paul picks up the idea of Ascension in his Letter to the Ephesians. The ongoing reality of the Ascension, he writes, is in the giving of the Spirit which guides the Church in its pursuit of perfection. Church communities are composed of people with many various gifts. Some, says St Paul, are called to be apostles, others teachers, others carers and so on. But all are one in their common task in 'the building up the body of Christ', he writes, 'knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped' (Ephesians 4:12, 16).

The fact is that we need each other, no one can achieve his or her own perfection alone even if we know what it is we want to achieve, like my neighbour with his many incomplete DIY building projects. It is of course often what we mean when we refer to our 'church'. Churches as buildings should be the outward expression of 'church' as the people of Christ. So, a person who comes into a church doesn't want to see the clutter of many failed DIY projects, but a church where there is order and positive signs of 'work in progress'. An Ascension community is one where all the talents of all its members are being used realistically but with an eye on heavenly perfection.

So let us make it our Ascensiontide promise that as people living in the messiness of the world, to pursue the vision of perfection as a community – not as perfectionists because we know this is bad – but as realists because we know we have the ever-present presence of Christ, the 'author and perfecter of our faith' (Hebrews 12:2), supporting and sustaining us in all our endeavours now and in the future.

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