



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 1st June 2025

Readings: *Acts 16.25-34 and John 17.20-26*

Easter VII – the Sunday after Ascension Day

‘In your hearts enthrone him’

The hymnwriter Caroline Maria Noel (1817-77) from the nineteenth century was the daughter of an Anglican priest, and her uncle was a Baptist minister and a peer of the realm, too.

She had a sweet nature of which it was written, ‘All who knew the Author ... were conscious of rich and varied powers of mind, of a delicate refinement, of a singular playfulness of thought, and a love of all that is beautiful in nature and in art, together with an ever-deepening humility.’¹

Throughout the last twenty years of her life, she knew persistent and sometimes debilitating illness, her hymns recognised as the outcome of her pain and suffering. It is all too easy for our suffering to turn us against God. How could God let it happen? Why should I give such a God the time of day? Few of us would be insensitive enough not to get that. Maybe we’ve been there. maybe we *are* there. But not so with Caroline Maria Noel. She found that her suffering was what Erik Routley calls, ‘a means of grace’.² It heightened her sense of needing the God whom she had discovered through Jesus Christ; the One whose life, death and resurrection demonstrated the power of God’s love to be a light capable of dispersing life’s shadows.

So, in 1870, when her illness had already progressed for over a decade, she offered us the hymn ‘*At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow.*’ It draws heavily on one of the earliest of all Christian hymns that we find in Philippians 2, and contrasts with the work of many another sickly hymnwriter, who so often allow their malady to shape an introspective hymnody. By contrast, Miss Noel points away from herself to Christ, ‘king of glory now’, ‘from the beginning ... the mighty word’.

We could have sung it last Thursday, when the Christian Church celebrated Ascension Day. We rejoiced that the earthly ministry of Jesus had reached its glorious climax, as the Bible told of how Jesus withdrew from his disciples and was carried up to heaven.³ Ascension Day is an opportunity for us to rejoice not so much that Jesus has gone from us, but rather that he reigns amongst us, the influence of his grace and truth forever at play in our world and in our lives.

Of course, poetry and pictures have often depicted Jesus as enthroned in heaven, just as our opening sequence had it this morning: ‘The Lord reigns; let earth rejoice and be glad.’⁴ ‘Join all on earth, rejoice and sing; glory ascribe to glory’s King.’⁵

Caroline Maria Noel does not want us to abandon Jesus in a ‘high and lifted up’⁶ heaven – beyond our ken or our encounter. She urges, ‘in your *hearts* enthrone him’. That’s where Jesus really wants to reign – in the very core of our being, shaping our thinking, and speaking, and acting.

Whoever it was that wrote the letter to the church in Colossae – and we don’t really know – they seem to have been addressing a church with problems set in a world that was regarded as profoundly evil. The Church included a variety of false teaching, a legalistic spirit, and a philosophical precociousness that one has described as, ‘clever and intellectual, the playground of the mind rather than the refuge of the heart’.⁷

¹ From an 1878 article on the website, *Hymnology Archive*

Available at <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/caroline-noel>; accessed 31st May 2025

² Routley, Erik 1952 *Hymns and Human Life* London: John Murray page 204

³ Luke 24.51

⁴ Psalm 97.1

⁵ From the hymn *God is gone up on high* by Charles Wesley 1707-88, RS 253.refrain

⁶ Isaiah 6.1

⁷ Barclay, William 1963 *The All-Sufficient Christ: studies in Paul’s Letter to the Colossians* London: SCM Press page 34

The author urges the people of that church to think again, not least because through Baptism they have already been transformed. Colossians 3 verse 3 puts Miss Noel's 'in your hearts enthrone him' slightly differently: 'you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God'.⁸

One of the points here is that in baptism we die to the old life, and are immersed into new life with Christ. You see, baptism is not just a 'thank you' for a child's safe arrival – though often it does include that; nor is it the graduation ceremony of an adult who comes to believe, though that might be one aspect of it. Rather, baptism signals a lifestyle choice by the believer in response to God's prior decision to say 'yes' to us. Baptism includes the enthroning of Christ in our hearts, making possible a change of what we think, how we live, who we are.

When the writer of Colossians says, 'hidden with Christ in God', the 'hidden' does not mean 'secreted away', 'or 'concealed', or 'camouflaged' but something more like 'immersed in a safe place'.⁹ And for the Christian, being in that safe place brings about a transition from life in the flesh to life in the Spirit.

George Herbert uses this verse from Colossians in his poem imaginatively entitled *Colossians 3.3*.¹⁰

My words and thoughts do both express this notion,
That *Life* hath with the sun a double motion.
The first *Is* straight, and our diurnal friend,
The other *Hid*, and doth obliquely bend.
One life is wrapped *In* flesh, & tends to earth:
The other winds towards *Him*, whose happy birth
Taught me to live here so, *That* still one eye
Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high:
Quitting with daily labour all *My* pleasure,
To gain at harvest an eternal *Treasure*.

As *we* are hidden with Christ in God, so the *verse* is immersed in the poem. The words are individually buried in each successive line, gradually appearing diagonally from the top left to the bottom right. Herbert helps us to understand that like the sun, we move in two directions. The sun has a double motion: we are most familiar with its *daily* east to west motion, 'our diurnal friend' as the poem has it; but *annually* the sun moves from west to east. So it is that, in Herbert's analogy, one part of us 'is wrapped in flesh and tends to earth'; the other part 'winds towards him'.

Might it be that to be hidden in Christ with God is wit that love that is 'new every morning' to be strengthened for winding towards God, and to a Christlike way of living?

Time and again, we are reminded that the essence of this life 'hidden with Christ in God' is faith, hope, and love¹¹ – 'faith in Jesus Christ, love of [both neighbour and stranger], and hope of heaven'.¹²

To have *faith* in Jesus Christ is not so much to understand everything he teaches and offers as to be ready consistently to take it seriously and to engage with it. That way, we gradually unearth the marvellous reality that 'to see Jesus is to see his Father'.¹³ It is this life of faith, an adventure of enquiry and discovery. But that faith is only possible when 'in our hearts we enthrone him'.

Faith; Love. To have *love* for both neighbour and stranger is one way of living out that faith in Jesus Christ. Even when we can't put into words every abstruse element of Christian doctrine, we *can* put into deeds the absolute imperative of Christian ethics, which is to do to others as we would be done

⁸ Colossians 3.3 (NRSV)

⁹ MacDonald, Margaret Y. 2000 *Colossians Ephesians* in the *Sacra Pagina* series of commentaries Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press page 128

¹⁰ Herbert, George 1593-1633 *Colossians 3.3*, from *The Temple* (1633)

¹¹ I Corinthians 13.13

¹² Barclay 116 altd

¹³ John 14.9

unto,¹⁴ to turn the other cheek,¹⁵ *and* to forgive seventy times seven.¹⁶ That way, we gradually unearth the marvellous reality that God is love and those ‘who love [that love] are born of God and know God’.¹⁷ It is a pilgrimage of trial and error, is this loving, of flawed stumbling followed with fresh starts ... seventy times seven. But that love is only possible when in our hearts we enthrone him.

Faith; Love; Hope. To have the *hope* of heaven, is to embrace the thought that because Jesus lives, we shall live,¹⁸ that whether we live or die we belong to the Lord.¹⁹ Heaven is not a place different from earth, nor is it a time different from now. It is the state of being confident that in this life God is with us, and in the life to come we will be with God. That way, we gradually unearth the marvellous reality that nothing, whether we live or die, can separate us from the love of God.²⁰ It’s an assurance born of lifelong prayer and of tenacious clinging, sometimes by our fingernails, to the truth that eventually satisfied Jeremiah: ‘The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.’²¹

But that hope is only possible when in our hearts we enthrone him.

We may not all have the sort of life that Caroline Maria Noel had, twenty years of illness, though I venture that few of us will *never* know trial, even tragedy. Come what may, this hymn writer invites us to let the Ascension be not just a rich metaphor of how Jesus is where he belongs at the right hand of God, but that Jesus longs also to be enthroned in our hearts until, in God’s good time, we ‘gain at harvest an eternal treasure.’

I could end, ‘may it be so’, but because of faith and hope and love we can trust that it will be.

Amen

N. P. Uden

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¹⁴ Matthew 7.12 and Luke 6.31

¹⁵ Matthew 5.38f

¹⁶ Matthew 18.21f

¹⁷ I John 4.7

¹⁸ John 14.19

¹⁹ Romans 14.8

²⁰ Romans 8.39

²¹ Lamentation 3.22f