



'God Doesn't Paint By Numbers'

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I've always liked the verse we read in Luke's Gospel telling us that **"Jesus then opened their minds to understand the scriptures."** I don't know about you, but that's exactly what I think I need sometimes to make sense of Scripture.

But I don't think we need a biblical scholar to tell us that the number 40 comes up time and again in the Bible, and that it is theological short-hand for a time of completion: it marks the end of a time of pilgrimage, or simply, the fulfilment of a promise; 40 stands for God's faithfulness to humanity.

So for example, in the story of Noah, after a rain of 40 days and 40 nights, the rainbow appears in the sky. In the gospels, Jesus begins his ministry with 40 days of fasting and prayer in the desert.

Today, of course, is exactly 40 days since Easter. In the story of Jesus, these 40 days bring to an end the he spends with the disciples; it is also the culmination of his Resurrection presence among the many more to whom he appears from Easter onwards.

In a moment that always reads to me rather solemn, – or maybe just quiet, personal, and private – Jesus blesses the disciples, extending his hands over them, I imagine the way we usually do here at St James's at the end of each service. The Jesus is raised up to heaven and disappears among the clouds.

And I fully get that the Ascension tells us, – once and for all, – that the risen Christ joins earth to heaven, and heaven to earth. And I think this says that each of our lives is, in Christ, offered up to God, and treasured in his hands.

What I want to know, however, is how does Jesus know to call it time? Because I don't think it's simply a case of Jesus saying, well it's been 40 days; time for me to move on..!

From Easter Sunday — from that story of life from death, and Life beyond life, — we see Jesus sharing meals with his disciples, opening their eyes with a faith they had never known, and appearing to many others. The apostle Paul speaks of at least 500 women and men to whom Jesus appears (I Cor 15.7). **But somehow Jesus determines that – within these forty days – he has done everything there is for him to do?**

You might think, isn't that being a bit too literal about the whole thing? Isn't he reading too much into stories that are meant to be read symbolically anyway? That may be; sometimes I can be like a terrier about small details. But I think there is a mystery here that can tell us something important about God ... and about us.

So I hope you like a good mystery, because I think that's what we're in for. Though I think it might be best to trying looking at it from a different angle.

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Imagine that you are an artist, a painter working on a modern, abstract composition, – or maybe a portrait, or some representation from nature, – how would you know when the piece is "complete" and you've applied the final touch of paint? How would you know it's time to varnish and hang the work, time to call the Tate and get the Turner Prize people to notice you? When does an artist know that a painting is finished and he or she has put the final brushstroke on a canvas and painting is done?

In the late 19th century, the French painter Edouard Manet began working on a canvas. He painted over sections he wasn't happy with, then he added new elements to other section; at various points he left it sitting for long stretches of time before going back to push his brushes and palette knife over the canvas, slowly coaxing the surface to life. But he never considered the painting quite finished; or he simply couldn't let go. And Manet's unfinished painting sat slowly

changing in his studio for almost 30 years until his death.

I don't actually know anything about painting. I know that a number of you do! And I'm very quickly feeling out of my depth. But I do wonder if this little story about Edouard Manet tells us that an artist doesn't necessarily have an existing picture already in the mind to tell him or her when the painting on the canvas is finally finished?

Now, – I know what you're thinking – but what does this have to do with Jesus and the Ascension? I will come to that; I promise. **But first let me get some help from another kind of artist, from the** author and playwright Dorothy Sayers.

Some of you will know Dorothy Sayers (d. 1957) for her Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels. I know Sayers from her cathedral plays and radio dramas, but my wife, Julie, has worked her way through Peter Wimsey mysteries, and is particularly fond of what Sayers does in *Gaudy Night*.

Sayers was not only an artist but also a woman of defiant Christian conviction; that's the only description for her faith: defiant! (Sayers was also church warden at our neighbouring church of St Anne's Soho up until her death in 1957.) What I find interesting about Sayers is that she insisted that we really only understand God when we begin to think with the mind of an artist: *with creativity and imagination*.

Sayers, in fact, wanted us to think of God as an artist. Using her experience as a writer, Sayers imagined that God works – like an author – not to prescribe or dictate what we are to do with the life he gives us, but to empower and free us to the open possibilities that a living faith coupled with a thriving imagination will afford.

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Here is how Sayers works this out. For Sayers, an author first has an idea that she wants to turn into a book. When this idea takes hold of her imagination, the writer starts to shape the idea into words that will eventually end up in the book. Sayers says that that's the stage when you might hear an author say something like "My

book is already written—I have only to put it on paper."

But curiously for Sayers, putting the idea to paper and getting the book into a publication is only the beginning. Or, at least the published book is only one more stage in the creative process. Why? Because the book, of course, still needs its readers. And the real power of the book is in the way the story it re-writes itself in the reader's imagination. **For Sayers, every time you read the book, you make another copy in your brain.** And that's when it becomes truly your book, truly a story you learn to tell in your own words. And that's when the book, – or the painting, or the dramatic performance – begins to transform your world!

But here's why Sayer's thinking about God as a divine author or artist puts an end to fossilised ideas about God. Sayers insisted – as only the formidable Sayers could – that when we apply creativity to our thoughts about God, **we forget that we were taught that God is an immovable force subjecting the world to his unbending will. Sayers obviously knew that that's the picture of God many of us have by default.**

But for Sayers, God the Artist is a recognition that God is not working in your life and mine from a predetermined template of what our life should look like. God doesn't have a finished picture of how you and I are going to reach the kind of life he would like us to have. So what Sayers is really telling us is that **the living God that Jesus shows us is a Real Artist. And a real artist doesn't paint by numbers.**

Sometimes people think of the Apostle's Creed as painting by numbers. These are the words we borrow in this church in order to, together, affirm our faith. And even though, again, these are only borrowed words from other Christians over the centuries, across all cultures, all persuasions, and representing all shades of belief, sometimes people think of the Apostle's Creed as a formula that fixes in place what Christians believe, and the way in which they are to express their beliefs.

That's a misconception. And behind this misconception are the part of the Creed that says "I believe that Jesus died, rose again, and ascended into heaven." And we say to ourselves, but how could I say that credibly in our day? What a strange thing to say: who could possibly

believe such a thing, even on this Day of Christ's Ascension.

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And I suppose if I were to ask whether each one of you here tonight believes every word of the Apostle's Creed, the answer would be, "No, not everyone, not every word." But on this score, I'm with Nadia Bolz-Weber. Nadia is a Pastor in the Lutheran churches in the United States. She wrote a book called *Finding God in All the Wrong People*. What a wonderful title: that sounds like my kind of God, my kind of people. And for Nadia, the point is that we say the Apostle's Creed together. And we do this because, with a congregation this size, there is at least one person for each line of the Creed.

So, we're covered.

If it makes any difference to you, I believe every line of the Creed: I believe that Jesus died, he rose again, and ascended into heaven.

But the important point is that the Creed is not a formula, but a pattern that reminds us — every time we say it — that Jesus is not an artist who can't let go, who coerces his followers to a single, predetermined pattern of living. The risen and Ascended Christ is an Artist who trusts his followers to continue working on his masterpiece we call redeemed life, healed life, a life of peace-making, and a life of continually seeking after justice. And in those 40 days between Easter and Ascension, Jesus gathers around him, from all walks of life, men and women who throng to that final word of blessing Jesus prays over his disciples.

In that very moving final scene, Jesus fills his disciples with confidence, saying '**You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon you; and so you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.**'

And with these words, Jesus leaves his disciples, he trusts his disciples, — he trusts us — to seek God for inspiration for how we are going to love one another; how we are going to forgive as we are forgiven; how we are going to love our neighbour, and love the stranger, as ourselves.

And so Jesus hands the painting over to us. And with the promise of inspiration from the Holy Spirit — he trusts us to be his witnessing eyes and ears in the world, his hands and feet, he empowers us and — even in an age of confusion, death and terror — to be his storytellers, writing with our own lives the story of a world touched by God, a world pregnant with Resurrection life.

As for the rest of the story, that remains to be written, over the coming days, and at the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost. And I promise you that the story of the Holy Spirit is nothing less than the story of '**God within you, God beside you, God above you, God ever before you, and always for you.**'

But for now, all we know is that "Jesus opened their minds, ... and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them into the clouds and was carried up into heaven." Amen.

Ivan Khovacs