

Sermon on John 17: 20–26 – Ascension Day 2026 at St Mary’s, Osnabrück –

- Regional Bishop Friedrich Selter -

Dear congregation,

“Even before my flight, I knew that our planet is small and vulnerable. But it was only when I saw it from space, in all its indescribable beauty and fragility, that I realised humanity’s most important task is to protect and preserve it for future generations.” These words come from Sigmund Jähn, who in 1978 became the first German astronaut to take part in a space expedition. The message of Christ’s Ascension invites us to perceive this earth, in all its beauty and vulnerability, from a distance, whilst at the same time calling us to closeness, so that we may make this world a little better in our own small ways.

The Christian faith gives us distance and at the same time calls us to genuine closeness. It directs us towards this world and its people, and at the same time it grants us, time and again, a respite from the all-too-pressing issues and challenges. That is why we celebrate worship.

It is not for nothing that our longing sometimes turns towards the heavens. Everyone knows the line from the hymn, ‘above the clouds, freedom must surely be boundless’. That heavenly longing resonates within it. The longing to find oneself, detached from all the pressures of life. The longing for a clear perspective that helps us to distinguish between what is important and what is trivial.

Anyone facing a difficult task would be well advised to step back and gain some perspective first. From a distance, one can see the bigger picture more clearly, whilst at the same time sharpening one’s eye for the details. Situations where decisions must be made create pressure and a sense of confinement. Gaining some distance and time allows us to regain clarity and make room for the gentle voice of the heart.

The feast day is meant to be a space that allows for such a break from everyday life and offers distance from everything that weighs on people. Here, too, silence has its place, and hands may rest in prayer. For this is about something greater than our daily lives. This is about God. He is greater than our greatest worries. And nothing is too small for him that he would not take to heart. To perceive and believe this, we need silence and prayer.

By ascending into heaven, Jesus does not simply extricate himself from a predicament along the lines of: ‘Scotti, beam me up.’ Rather, he distances himself from the limited setting of his earthly ministry so that he may be equally close to all people in this world. By ascending into heaven, Jesus’ ministry is no longer bound to a specific place. Instead, his message of God’s love spans the entire globe. For God’s love is global. It applies equally to all people. It is the bond of love that holds our world together and connects us all. It is a delicately woven bond, tender and vulnerable, just like love itself.

We human beings, and especially we Christians, are called to continue to weave this bond, to protect it, and, where cracks appear, to mend the threads.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he did not leave his followers helpless or desolate. Instead, he placed the power of his Spirit in their hearts and minds. Above all, however, he does one thing: he prays to God for us humans, prays for this world. It is a prayer for mercy: “May they all be one.” For if all people are one, then they credibly reflect the unity of God the Father with his Son, Jesus Christ. Only when they are all one do they bear credible witness to the one God, who is love and the foundation of all flourishing life.

History and the present day show how little we manage to achieve this. We must recognise: only God can grant this unity, this all-encompassing peace. And yet, in this prayer, we should also hear an appeal: “Make sure that you are one. Get involved. That is your life’s task.” Where societies are divided, recognise the scandal of this division and seek out what unites us. “Human dignity, love for one’s neighbour and solidarity” – these are core values of our faith. As a Church, we wish to uphold these values when, in the face of polarisation and division, we stand up for a democratic and united society.

And that is also the main theme of the German Catholic Day, which opened yesterday in Würzburg. Its motto is: “Take courage, stand up!” Worship services and political debates go hand in hand there. Because spirituality does not simply mean religious sentimentality, but rather the coexistence of contemplation and action, of worshipping God and social engagement.

Christians cannot be people who sow hatred and denigrate others. Human dignity and solidarity are their top priorities. Christians cannot be people who judge human dignity differently based on ethnic origin and identity. Solidarity and charity are their top priorities. Christians cannot be warmongers. And warmongers cannot be Christians. It does not help if they call themselves Cyril or pose as Jesus.

The American musician Julie Gold composed the song ‘From a Distance’ in 1985. Bette Midler later turned it into a hit:

From a distance, the world looks blue and green
 And the snow-capped mountains white
 From a distance, the ocean meets the stream
 And the eagle takes to flight

From a distance, there is harmony
 And it echoes through the land
 It's the voice of hope
 It's the voice of peace
 It's the voice of every man.“

Jesus does not need the distance of heaven to see the beauty of this earth, unmarred by wickedness and destruction. Rather, his merciful gaze has always perceived this world, with all its human misery and hardship, with complete empathy. And yet, at the same time, he already sees it as a redeemed world: a world blue with water and green with forests and fields. Where sea and rivers meet and the eagle spreads its wings. A world in which all people recognise one another as sisters and brothers, reconciled and united as children of God.

As Christians, we can therefore only celebrate Ascension Day in ecumenical fellowship. Our division is a scandal. It must be overcome. We do not have to become the same. But we should recognise one another as equal, willed and affirmed by God: united in diversity through God's love.

"That they may all be one" does not diminish individuality. The uniqueness of our personalities may remain distinct. And at the same time, our shared humanity possesses the same dignity. And the more our society becomes differentiated, the more people long for what unites them. "It's the voice of hope, it's the voice of peace, it's the voice of every man." To give this hope a voice and a true form is what charity means. Love bestows dignity upon us as human beings. It is the bond that holds our world together. A delicately woven bond. The world needs us Christians as weavers: where threads have come loose in the bond of love, we Christians are called to reconnect them. We can do this. From a distance and in the same time hand in hand.

Amen.

(Translation by DeepL)