

Readings for Ascension Sunday

16th May 2021

First Reading: Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Gospel: St Luke 24:44-53

Jesus said to the disciples, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

A Reflection for Ascension Sunday

Ascension is – or once was – one of the great festivals of the church, on a par with Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. As one commentator put it: ‘to say that it has fallen on hard times is to risk understatement’. Quite why this has happened is unclear to me. The modern practice of celebrating fifty days of Easter, from Easter until Pentecost, which is in keeping with the Jewish tradition of fifty days from Passover to Pentecost, probably hasn’t helped, but it was on a downward trajectory before that.

We can’t imagine a similar thing happening to Easter, yet the ascension of Jesus to sit at the right hand of God the Father is a similarly essential part of the Christian faith – we only have to look at the words we use in our services. In the Nicene creed, which we will say after immediately after this sermon if we are in church, it says: ‘On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.’

As you are probably discovering, I am a bit of a traditionalist when it comes to keeping the different festivals and holy days of the church calendar. I think they add colour and shape to our faith across the cycle of the year, and weekday festivals (Ascension Day was on Thursday) are one way -not the only way, I grant - of bringing our faith and everyday life together as an integrated whole.

So what is Ascension Day, one of the essential parts of our faith, about? Jesus was taken up into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. Yes, but..... The accounts we are given are full of symbolism and mystery, and certainly stretch the rational parts of our minds. Our ancestors may have thought that heaven was ‘up’, somewhere above the clouds, but we know this can’t be so in any literal sense.

When I was going through discernment for ministry, I was asked by a priest of this diocese what the symbol for Ascension was. I was told it was a pair of feet sticking out from the bottom of a cloud - I am still uncertain about whether the person concerned was pulling my leg or sincerely believed this, for artwork depicting such a scene is not difficult to find. More common in art are scenes depicting Jesus floating somewhere just above the disciples’ heads. Personally, I don’t find either of these images very helpful and I try to avoid ideas of ‘up’. Ascension is a time when people like me, who have particularly rational minds, need to set that aside and embrace the symbolism and mystery as a different way of seeking out truth.

The Ascension comes forty days after the Resurrection. Forty is a symbolic number in the Bible, one that we encounter in many different places: Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, the Israelites spent forty years there, Moses spent forty days and nights on Mount Sinai more than once, it rained forty days and nights during the flood. I could go on. Forty was both a large and approximate number that often preceded some significant event or change. So here, there are forty days after the Resurrection, in which Jesus appears to his disciples, before the Ascension, helping to emphasise the significance of that event.

Two of our readings today give us an account of Jesus' ascension, one effectively reiterating the other. The passage from Luke are the last verses of his Gospel, and that from Acts, which of course was also written by Luke, is the beginning of that book. In effect, what we read in Acts is a reminder of where Luke left off, before he continues the story. Both passages provide us with recaps of the essence of Christ's saving work and then tell us of his ascension into heaven. We are told that a cloud took him out of their sight. Clouds in the Bible are often symbols of divine presence – remember the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites in the wilderness.

These accounts tell us several important things about the Ascension. Firstly, it marks the ends of Jesus' embodied, earthly ministry. There had been many witnesses to the resurrection and therefore the fact that Jesus was no longer present needed to be addressed for those who came after. The disciples have one last tutorial with Jesus, to understand the Scriptures, and are then commissioned to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all nations. Up until this point, they have been largely passive witnesses, with a few exceptions mostly watching Jesus at work, but now they are to become active witnesses, continuing Jesus' work in the world.

This leads to the second purpose of this event, that it is a transition point to a new focus on the continued work here on earth. This work will be empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit and the disciples are instructed by Jesus to wait in Jerusalem until they are 'clothed with power from on high' - our subject for next week. It is the beginning of this continued work here on earth, the work and witness of the earliest days of the church, that Luke writes about in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. This refocussing is also emphasised in the passage from Acts by the appearance of the two men in white who ask the disciples why they are looking towards heaven.

And the men in white lead us to a third purpose: the disciples are reminded that Jesus will come again, in the same way that he went. The work of the church takes place in the 'in between' times, after Jesus' Ascension and before his second coming.

The reading from the letter to the Ephesians is part of a longer prayer of blessing. Through wisdom and revelation, Paul prays that they will know God more deeply: through the hope to which God has called them, through the riches of God's glorious inheritance and through the immeasurable greatness of God's power. He explains that this is the power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at God's right hand – a description which evokes the ascension. He then goes on to say that God has put all things under his (Jesus') feet.

These readings together capture some of the tension of the 'in between' times, the 'now' and 'not yet' of the Christian message. All things are already under Christ, the kingdom is already here, and yet will only be fulfilled when Jesus returns. One phrase from this week's reading from Acts struck me as illustrating this paradox: '...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem...'. Jesus' message of repentance and forgiveness, of love and peace, which began in Jerusalem, is in sharp contrast to the terrible events that have been taking place there this week.

So, the Ascension was a necessary event, and is an essential part of our faith, because it marks the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, it makes way for empowerment by the Holy Spirit, refocussing our attention on the continued work of Jesus in the church, and it reminds us that we live in the 'in between' times, that Jesus will come again.

The manner in which the Ascension occurred is a mystery to us – something that confounds our human experience but which we should not try to over-simplify or bring within our limited understanding. It is a mystery - something to ponder, to seek its truth and meaning without needing to nail it down. Instead of being present with a few in one

physical body, Jesus is now accessible to all through the Holy Spirit, and the work that Jesus began will come to fruition by that Spirit working through his followers.