

Readings for Ascension Sunday

1st June 2025

First Reading: Acts 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

I have been reading a book recently called *How we learn to be brave*. It is by Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde, the Bishop of Washington, who hit the headlines earlier this year with her sermon appealing for mercy, amongst other things, to the new Trump administration the day after the President's inauguration. Some people would say that, on that day, she was brave, and she certainly had the courage to be true to her Christian faith and speak that truth to power. This book was written before that pivotal moment in January, published in 2023, and I don't know the answer to the question implicit in the title 'how do we learn to be brave?' because I haven't finished the book yet. However, I suspect from what I've read so far that she would regard her whole life up to that point as preparation for it in some way.

Bishop Mariann starts her book by thinking about moments in our lives which we would all recognise. She calls them 'heroic moments'. There are the points in our lives when we, as she puts it, 'decide to go'. Those times when we choose to step out into something new, in doing so leaving behind some of the things that are familiar and comforting to us and facing unfamiliar territory ... when we leave home, when we get married, when we make a career change or move to a new place. Sometimes, the new path is not of our choosing but we have to decide to get on with it ... when someone dies or leaves, or we lose our job ... and suddenly the future looks very different.

And then there are the points in our lives, no less heroic but often unnoticed by others, when we 'decide to stay' and go deeper into commitments we have made, even though we might dearly wish for change. Sometimes we might decline exciting opportunities presented to us for the sake of stability for those around us ... perhaps the schooling of our children or care for an ageing parent. Whether we choose to go or to stay, both types of decisions take courage, she argues.

There are elements of both staying and going in the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Jesus, of course, was the one going. His ascension was an essential sequel to the resurrection and Paul connects the two explicitly in the passage from Ephesians. In speaking of God's power in Christ, Paul says:

'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...'

And he goes on to make clear that Christ has ascended to a position of authority above everything else, for ever.

Paradoxically, Jesus' ascension didn't so much remove him from the earth as make it possible for his presence to be with all people for all time. Jesus went in order that he might stay with them always.

As Jesus was going, the disciples, meanwhile, were staying, at least for the time being. They had had three exciting years with Jesus, an astonishing teacher and healer, the one they had tentatively come to recognise as the Messiah. Then they had witnessed all their hopes spiral down into the apparent catastrophe of Good Friday, leaving them bewildered and afraid, lost without him. But, after only three days Jesus was back with the astonishing events of

Easter resurrection and his post-resurrection appearances; for the disciples there was overwhelming joy, all mixed up with feelings of puzzlement and doubt. As both the passage from Acts and our Gospel tell us, Jesus spent time with them, renewing their confidence in his promises and helping them to understand the Scriptures and all that they foretold about him. And now another miracle as he is taken from their sight into heaven. It has been something of a rollercoaster ride, and we might forgive them for thinking 'now what?'.

We have the advantage of hindsight. We know how everything turned out, the coming of the Holy Spirit and how the church got started, how the Gospel spread across the known world, the highs and lows of the things done in Jesus' name over two thousand years of history. The disciples did not know any of this, but they did what Jesus said, they stayed. It probably took courage – the authorities there weren't exactly friendly towards them - but they remained in Jerusalem with, as our Gospel reading tells us, 'great joy; and they were continually in the Temple blessing God'.

Their staying was only the next step. As Jesus had promised them, they would be 'baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.' And then they took off, metaphorically speaking – but that is for Pentecost, next week. However, it is another paradox that they stayed in order, ultimately, that they would be able to go, spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

The Ascension was an essential transition between resurrection at Easter and the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus went from the earth, in order that his presence would stay with his followers, and the disciples stayed in Jerusalem in order that they might receive the Holy Spirit and then go out into the world to share the Gospel.

Ascension shows us that transitions are necessary, that our lives are journeys, not static. We all have times when we should go and when we should stay and, whether we go or stay at any particular point, God is with us.

The things that happen in our lives, the choices we make or that are made for us, change and shape us. Just as the disciples didn't know what the future held, and I am sure didn't recognise the full implications of receiving the Holy Spirit, even though Jesus had told them it would happen, so we don't know exactly how our own stories will unfold. What we can be certain of is that we are God's own beloved children and that Jesus is with us through his Holy Spirit. And, whether our calling is to go or stay, we always get to choose whether or not we join in God's work of salvation in the world, participating in the healing of God's creation, sharing God's love unconditionally, stepping out of our comfort zones to discover God's presence in unexpected places. May we have the courage to do so, in the power of our ascended Lord, when those moments come.

I haven't finished Bishop Budde's book yet, but I'd like to share a final quote from towards the end of it:

'My prayer is that, by grace, we will all be emboldened to lean into the wisdom, strength, power, and grace that come to us whenever we find ourselves at a decisive moment. May you and I dare to believe that we are where we are meant to be when that moment comes, doing the work that is ours to do ...'