

Readings for Ascension Sunday

17th May 2026

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

It has been an 'interesting' week in politics in this country! It has been an 'interesting' period in global politics for a number of years. And it doesn't stand still for any length of time.

However, a paradox of our 'interesting' world, where the actions of the powerful few influence the lives of millions, often adversely, is that those who seem to hold the reins of power have less power than they think when it comes to a crunch. This week our Prime Minister and the UK Government are in power but also in a precarious position (at least at the time of writing!), a result of choices of millions of voters. The US/Israeli attack on Iran and other Middle Eastern neighbours in recent months, or the attack by Russia on Ukraine, have both been attacks by powerful nations on much weaker and more disadvantaged opponents, yet the result has been far from the walkover they seem to have expected.

Power of the political and military variety has a chequered and mostly dismal history, due at least in part because such power is so often misused.

Recently, I have been reading a book called 'Wildest Dream' by David Gee. In it, he explores some of the legends associated with the Green Man. One of chapters is about Merlin, but this is not the wizard of Arthurian legend. This is an earlier story of Merlin and the battle of Arthuret in Cumbria in the year 573, between Peredur, a prince of northern Wales, and Gwenddolau, a Scottish prince. In this legend, Merlin was a warrior and advisor on the Welsh side. Quoting Geoffrey of Monmouth, a 12th century chronicler, David says 'A time came when it happened that a quarrel arose among several of the princes of the realm. In a savage war, they had ravaged the unoffending populace in city after city.' Going on to relate the story of this particular battle, David says that the fighting was intense and that many soldiers fell on both sides, including three of Merlin's companions, who were killed in their enthusiasm to kill others. When the battle ended, there were dead and dying all around and Merlin was overwhelmed by a sorrow without relief. That type of sorrow, trauma, is similar to the trauma David encountered in war veterans today. This story of Merlin is a legend, though probably with some historical roots, but as David also says, 'one can hear the unmistakable appeal to a society in trouble, in thrall to war.' An appeal to find a better way.

We are still a world in thrall to war; there are so many places where that phrase 'in a savage war they had ravaged the unoffending populace' still applies. Worse, many of those who perpetrate these wars claim to be Christians, others leaders of different faiths. Some of them even claim to be doing the work of God.

Thursday was Ascension Day and today we reflect again on the Ascension. Luke, in the passages from Acts and from his Gospel, gives us two accounts of this final stage of Christ's three-stage departure: crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and Paul, in today's passage from the letter to the Ephesians reflects on significance of Ascension. He says: 'so ... you may know what is the hope to which he has called you ... and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power'. There's that word power again: 'his power for us who believe'. Does this mean that those who exercise power in the world, and who say that they are Christians,

are right when they say are doing God's work? I hope it won't surprise you to know that, where that entails waging war in the circumstances described, I disagree profoundly.

This passage from Ephesians is, partly, a celebration of God's power, and God's power is not one of force. Ephesians is likely to have been one of the last of Paul's letters, and maybe not written by him at all. It is addressed to early Christians, possibly those in Ephesus and possibly more widely, who probably experienced quite a lot of forceful power. They were a marginalised minority in a brutal empire, and often persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and killed. For them, and, I would argue, for the world today, this letter contained an important message of hope that ultimately God's power, shown in the resurrection and ascension of Christ, would triumph. The ascension is a demonstration of God's power that intends to draw all people into the blessings that God offers – his 'glorious inheritance'. As it says in today's Gospel, the disciples are witnesses, and they will receive God's power to share that blessing – but that is for next week and Pentecost.

Here, Paul goes on to remind us that Christ is above all earthly powers: 'above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come'. Christ is above everything that might try to separate people from God and from doing God's work in the world. And to be clear, God's work in the world is not to wage war, not to enrich ourselves at the expense of others, not to destroy or abuse all that God has made. Oscar Romero, the former archbishop of San Salvador who was assassinated in 1980, reflecting on the Ascension, wrote 'power is good, but abuse by humans has made it something to fear'.

Nevertheless, God's hope and power are forces for good and can be expressed properly – we are not powerless. There are many ways in which we can do God's work in the world, in which we can make a difference. I am, and have always been, a great believer in the power of individuals, taking small actions together, collectively effecting significant change, even though it may take time.

One powerful tool for God's work that we all have access to, and one that Paul demonstrates in this passage, is prayer. It should always be our first step as Christians. Paul starts this passage by telling his audience how he has prayed for them quite specifically. He expresses his gratitude for them and continues by praying blessings on them: 'I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that ... you may know the hope to which he has called you...'. It is one of several beautiful prayers for others in this letter. How wonderful to be prayed for like that! Do we pray like that for others?

Prayer is always powerful, whether or not our specific requests are answered as we wish. Just as some world leaders have found that those whom they considered weak and powerless actually have power to thwart their plans, so too we as Christians, however weak and powerless we may think we are, have power in our hands through prayer. We don't pray on our own; we pray with and through Christ who, now that he has ascended to heaven, continually intercedes for us.

As I am sure many of you will have experienced, to know that we are prayed for is something that encourages and strengthens us, and it doesn't just have to be in times of adversity. So, like Paul, let us give thanks for one another and for all those others who enrich the world in different ways, and let us pray for God's blessing on them. And psychologists tell us that gratitude is good for us, so good for those who do the praying too!

Ascension calls us to lift ourselves and others up in prayer, to encourage and to strengthen. To do so is to use God's

power wisely, and it is one of the most important things that we can do for others and for our beautiful but often troubled world. It is a beginning, a first step to living our lives in ways that further God's work in the world.