

Ascension-tide Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – May 2020

Acts 1.1-14; John 17.1-11

Are you excited by the Ascension of Jesus Christ? The disciples certainly were. Even though their Master and Friend had left them they were full of joy and expectation. Ascension-tide, the short season we are now in, is a bit like Advent or Lent but without the hair shirts, without the sense of judgment, without the penitential bits. It's a time of expectation and hope, preparation and journey. Like Advent and Lent it's not about arriving; it is about getting ready for what comes next.

The Ascension of Jesus brings a whole lot of things together. It marks the point in the story of our salvation, when the ministry of Jesus passes from the local to the global. While he was with his family and his friends and his disciples on earth, his true identity was veiled. Now, no longer. Up to this point, his influence has been time-bound and local, in Galilee, Palestine and Jerusalem. But now, his reach has become global, and eternal, once again.

Yet he is changed. Jesus has become once more what he already was from before time, but now he has the essence of humanity about him. God so loved humankind that he has allowed himself to be changed by us. Love does that.

Another way to view the Ascension of Jesus, is that this physical world could not for long contain what Jesus had become when he rose from the dead. Our risen Lord became then essentially part of heaven. Although it is very much part of our Christian vision that we catch glimpses in this life of our eternal home, heaven is essentially another place, another time, a different universe. Jesus has gone there ahead of us, where he will welcome us in due course.

There are at least three messages in the Ascension of Jesus. It is the final step in revealing who Jesus really is; he is the Lord of heaven, the Lord of eternal life. Secondly, as Lord of Heaven he will welcome his brothers and sisters (that's you and me) there too. And the third message is a promise, the promise of his continuing presence. "I will not leave you comfortless." Jesus ascends to heaven to make good the promise of the Holy Spirit. For it is the Holy Spirit who puts us in touch with the eternal life of heaven, while we remain and work and serve in this world.

Our Gospel reading says that this eternal life comes from knowing God and knowing Jesus. Eternal life comes from this because it is reflection of character of God. The Holy Spirit is not a single experience, rather it is the work of the Spirit to reveal more and more to us about who God is. It is a process that never ceases. We know that getting to know and love particular people can be a life changing experience. So it is with getting to know God and Jesus, through his Holy Spirit.

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There is a further message to us in the Ascension story, which is a call to prayer. This is what the disciples did afterwards, they waited and they prayed, joyfully, so that when the Spirit was given, they were ready. This is what we need to do too. There have been quite a number of times over the last couple of months when the story of Holy Week and Easter has seemed to fit alongside the story of the Lockdown in a remarkable way, and here we encounter this resonance again.

The Lockdown is beginning to be lifted; we are looking forward to better times, different times, but it is a confusing time. It's easy to lose our bearings; amongst the different priorities, challenges and complexities, in all the balancing of individual freedoms with community benefits. It's important for us not to rush out and anticipate restored freedoms, but rather to think; to think more carefully than before when the Lockdown was full on.

This is a time for the Church to think and pray too, about what we are going to do differently in future. Everyone knows that the Coronavirus crisis will change our country, hopefully for the better; and the Church is surely being changed too. And for Christians, the most important thing to do when things change, is to pray, to get our bearings from God, and from our faith in Jesus, and not just to react instinctively or habitually. What needs to be restored? What needs to be left behind? What is God telling us about the things that are now the most important?

In the last few years, a global church movement has grown up, started by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, calling the Church to a special time of prayer in the ten days from Ascension to Pentecost. It's called "Thy Kingdom Come". Do Google it. Do look at the diocesan and Church of England websites. There are lots of resources that people can use, individually, or in families, or in groups, with readings and prayers and ways of praying. There are some links in our Parish eNews and on our website.

For despite the cosmic and eternal meanings of the Ascension of Jesus, this time is essentially a call to pray and prepare, joyfully and expectantly. Praying is always a good thing to do. When we pray, we will become better prepared for what is to come; stronger, more resilient, more in touch with God and with one another. When we pray, we are less driven by our own weaknesses and anxieties and fears, and we are more in touch with the eternal and loving purposes of God, revealed to us by the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

So do use this time to pray, maybe to start or restart a pattern of prayer. There are lots of resources. You can do it alone or with others. It will make you stronger and more joyful, whatever challenges you face and whatever challenges the Church faces. And know that when you pray, the Holy Spirit helps you to know God and to know Jesus, and you will find that you are more in touch with eternal life in the here and now. Amen.

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