Sermon Sunday May 24 2020 at Stowe Church

Acts 1: 6-14

John 17: 1-11

Last Thursday, you don’t need reminding (or maybe you do in these strange times when one day looks very much like another) was Ascension Day. The day Jesus was last on earth: last seen going vertically upwards.

What was the Ascension all about? Why was it necessary?

Jesus had died; Jesus had returned from the grave and was alive again. But His place was now with His Father in heaven, and His disciples would now be in charge (as it were) of things of the Kingdom on earth.

If Jesus’ resurrection appearances had simply faded away, and one day He simply wasn’t there any more, everyone would wonder if it all really happened. No, just as there was a fixed moment in history when Jesus came to earth and was born, there had to be a defining moment when He left. And although today we don’t think that heaven is simply a place up in the sky, those living with him then clearly did, along with believing the earth was flat; and so to see Jesus disappear bodily into the sky would have meant a lot to those watching. To choose a day on which to return to heaven, while His friends were all looking on, (perhaps in the way Elijah did?), there would be proof of His returning to His Father. And in one sense He hadn’t gone, because His Holy Spirit was within each follower.

Note one important thing. Unlike Elijah, when those with Him went off to look for Him in great distress, here we read in Luke 24:52 that ‘they returned to Jerusalem with great joy.’ In spite of the Ascension, or perhaps because of it, the disciples were quite sure that Jesus had not gone from them, but that He was with them for ever, even if they weren’t too sure what that meant.

Throughout His ministry Jesus laboured under a great disadvantage. The centre of His message was the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ first recorded words in Mark, the most concise gospel, are these: ‘The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’

But the trouble was that Jesus meant one thing by the Kingdom and everyone else meant quite another. The Jews were aware they were God’s chosen race, which they were, but they took that to mean they were destined for special honour and privilege and world-wide dominion. The whole course of their history showed that this could never be; Palestine was a little country no more than 120 miles by 40. It had its moments of independence, but throughout its history, it was subject to a series of take-overs - by the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. So the Jews looked forward to a day when God would intervene in their story, and that He would do what they would never be able to do – by divine intervention, world sovereignty would be theirs. In other words, they perceived the Kingdom in purely political terms.

And how did Jesus view the Kingdom? If we study the Lord’s prayer we find two petitions side by side: ‘Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’

Now this is characteristic of the Hebrew style of writing, in saying two things, the second of which explains and expands on the first. It happens throughout the Psalms. So ‘Thy Kingdom come’ really means the same as ‘Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven’. So by using the term Kingdom, Jesus means a society on earth where God’s sovereign will is perfectly done as it is already in heaven. Thus it will be a Kingdom based on love and not on power.

This an attainment beyond human nature, unless you factor in the Holy Spirit. Only through the Holy Spirit of Christ within us can we hope to fulfil God’s will on earth. How? Well, you may remember the Jesus called the Holy Spirit ‘The Comforter’ in John’s gospel. But we sometimes forget the original meaning of Comforter. It comes from the Latin ‘con fortis’ which means ‘with strength’ – in other words, the Spirit strengthens us and makes us brave in all situations. That was Jesus’ prayer for His disciples in our gospel reading, as He contemplated the end of His life on earth. His thoughts and prayers were for His followers: ‘I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world; Holy Father, protect them…’.

As well as the Kingdom, there is another topic which the Ascension raises. In v.11 as the disciples are gazing upwards, an angel appear and tell them off (it seems to me). ‘Why are you staring up into heaven?’ Well, isn’t it obvious? But they are told that, just as you have seen Him disappear back into heaven today, one day in the future He will re-appear from heaven. So here we are faced with the Second Coming.

Let me say a couple of things about the Second Coming. First, to speculate when it will be is pointless. We read in Mark’s gospel that even Jesus, while on earth, didn’t know when it would be. So it seems almost blasphemous for us to try and guess the timing.

Secondly, the essential teaching of Christianity is that God has a plan for human history. Life is not a haphazard series of chance events going nowhere. There is purpose to it all. There is some divine, far-off event towards which the whole of creation is moving. And at the end, Jesus Christ Himself will appear as Judge and Lord of all.

So the call to us is to strive for the coming of that Day and to make ourselves ready for it, whenever it comes. And it may be tomorrow! Are YOU ready?

I wonder if you would mind if I indulge myself briefly. The Ascension is hard for some folk to understand and to believe. I get that. So I wrote this poem to try and explain why we should believe those who wrote about these things so long ago.

**They were there**

We didn’t see Jesus walk Galilee streets,

or hear Him discomfit the Jewish elites;

we weren’t by His side as He met people’s needs,

so we couldn’t observe His miraculous deeds.

But there in the gospels we read of His acts;

we trust them as truths and we treat them as facts.

We firmly believe, though we weren’t on the scene,

because Jesus’ disciples wrote down what they’d seen.

So faith’s not restricted to things we can see,

since life doesn’t come with a life-guarantee.

No, we believe witnesses, honest and fair -

and how can we trust them? ***Because they were there***.

Because they were there. That’s why we believe them. They witnessed Jesus, His life and death and resurrection. What is interesting is that in the Greek, the word for witness and the word for martyr are the same word. To be a witness means to be loyal no matter what the cost. Earlier, I mentioned Jesus’ first recorded words in Mark’s gospel, words about God’s Kingdom. Among Jesus last recorded words in Luke’s gospel to His followers are that ‘you shall be My witnesses’. And if that means martyrdom, so be it. Again I ask, are you ready?

Paul Mileham