

Ascension 2020

Readings for Ascension Thursday:

Matthew 28: 16-20 Acts 1 1 – 11 Ps 47 Ephesians 1: 15-23

Our focus today is on Ascension, which we were planning to celebrate also on Ascension Thursday with a combined service of all the local Anglican churches, until the virus intervened...

What has come to be known as “the Ascension” is recorded in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, by Paul in some of his letters and also by Luke in the Book of Acts.

The reference in Mark 16 (v.12-20) is believed to come from a very late manuscript which many believe almost certainly relied on Luke’s account (Luke 24: 44-53). So, it seems to be a particular emphasis for Luke. He is the only one who describes it as a visual and witnessed event. Many scholars question this, saying that he has given dramatic, concrete form to what is a theological and spiritual truth.

Like many stories in the Bible, Luke’s Ascension account brings together the transcendent reality of God and the finite physical world that cannot contain or describe the otherness of the divine – we have no language, no terms or categories capable of containing the reality of God. Our imagination, intellect and emotions do not stretch far enough.

We need to be careful of trying to understand the Ascension over-literally: Suggesting that Jesus went up to heaven, which is somewhere above clouds. That is not it.

What it can be said to be is: A pictorial, symbolic description of the way that the physical presence of Christ left this world to be replaced by spiritual presence. Saying that is not to deny the event but to admit that what did happen lies beyond simple, literal description.

Saying that is also not to downplay the importance of the Ascension, which is reflected in the fact that it is included in those great statements of our faith, the creeds, both the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed (Prayer Book: page 12 and 123).

So why did Luke think it was so important that he wrote about it not once but twice, and why is it important for us?

Because, as one scholar put it: “The Ascension cannot be forgotten. It must not be ignored. For without the Ascension, the death and resurrection of Jesus would carry far less value, if any, in the plan of redemption. It is this glorious Ascension that is the culmination of the atoning work of Christ, the guarantee of his promises, the proof of his claims, and the beginning of his dominion.” – Bible.org

This points to a way of looking at the Ascension that I find helpful – it's the Big Picture approach rather than the microscope view.

Many years ago, I was privileged to mentor a very capable and dedicated Veterinary Science student. Perhaps not surprisingly, she got herself tied in knots over the doctrine of Ascension and ended up doubting the existence of God and worrying that she was losing her faith.

This was largely because in taking a scientific approach, she was trying to put the doctrine under a microscope, trying to examine it in detailed isolation. Of course, it cannot stand up to the scientific demands of being repeatable, verifiable and observable.

But if we stand back, look at it in the context of the whole divine plan of redemption, it falls into place as one of the steps on the road towards the redemption of humanity. As Jesus explains to his disciples: "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me..." (Luke 24: 44).

In a sense, in his resurrected form in the period between the Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus was restrained by being incarnate, subject to the limitations of time and space. Ascension in a sense set him free.

Because of the Ascension, Christ is no longer present as a particular human being who occupies a particular place and time, which must have been a hard truth for the disciples who thought they had lost him in the Crucifixion, and then got him back through the Resurrection and now they're going to lose him again, or so it seems... However, through the Ascension, Jesus becomes more *abundantly* even *super-abundantly* present and active than he was before. (The prayer on the pew sheet picks up this theme).

And that's not to say he is present as some kind of ghostly presence who hangs around in the air but never takes form. No, says Luke, Christ is now present as the material body of Christian believers, brought into being and inspired by the very Spirit that made Jesus who and what he was. Carrying on with that quote from Luke 24, Jesus said: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead... and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised..." (v. 45-49).

The Spirit now makes the *Church* what *Jesus* was, infusing and shaping its life and work so that Jesus' mission continues in the Church as a real and tangible Christ-presence for the world, which is the theme illustrated by the Gospel set for the Seventh Sunday after Easter: Matthew 28: 16-20.

So, Luke seems to be saying that Ascension is important because even though Jesus seems now to be absent, actually, through the Resurrection and Ascension he is more present than he was when he was present. The Ascension makes Christ

present in what one of my favourite preachers called “the irreducible power and authority of the Other (*exousia* in Greek), a presence which so exceeds and overwhelms our powers of comprehension that when God visits us, we know God has done so, but we are left powerless to explain how or why...” – Nathan Nettleton

Another commentator said: “We must not only think of the Ascension as the culmination of Christ’s earthly ministry, the crowning victory, but also as the beginning of a new phase of his ministry.” – Bible.org

That brings us to the reading from Acts, which reminded me of something that former Archbishop of Cap Town, Desmond Tutu once said: “The Anglican church is very good at giving answers to questions that no one is asking.”

In other words, we can be rather good at missing the point, getting the wrong end of the stick and losing the plot. That’s what the disciples do yet again in the Acts narrative in rather spectacular fashion. “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” they ask him.

As I said previously (Easter V), I suspect Jesus was probably more than just a little bit exasperated with his hapless followers, and certainly had a right to be because after all that they have seen and all they have experienced, they still didn’t seem to understand him and his mission. They just didn’t seem to get it.

For centuries the Jews had longed for a Messiah who would restore Israel to its place as the leading political, military and economic superpower. Jesus, however, had actively resisted that agenda for the entire three years he has spent with his followers. Instead of calling down the armies of heaven he submitted to being crucified, but that still wasn’t enough to make the disciples understand.

Poor old disciples.... Jesus first tells them off gently: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1: 7) and then draws their attention back to the plot: That they will be equipped with the power of Holy Spirit to be his witnesses and carry his message to the world.

And then, as if it’s not enough to have been rebuked by Jesus, the disciples are told off again, this time by two men dressed in white who appear as they’re standing staring open-mouthed into the sky wondering about what has just happened and where Jesus has gone (Acts 1: 10-11).

We are familiar with the idea that the task entrusted to disciples has been passed down to us, we follow in their footsteps. Rowan Williams in the book I quoted previously (*Tokens of Trust*) describes it as “a chain of human contact coming down to our own day, a chain of voices and faces in which Jesus is active”.

I want to suggest that there may be times when we as individuals and a community are like the disciples not only in the mission we inherited, but also in the habit we have of sometimes of standing staring into the sky waiting for something to happen, in the process we miss the point. There are perhaps times when we stand looking in

the wrong direction, as though heaven where Jesus has gone is somehow remote from us. We miss the point, perhaps, because the Bible usually depicts heaven not as somehow removed but coming towards us, drawing near to us, breaking into our world, taking root and growing, almost imperceptibly in our midst, and in each of us.

That's because heaven is God's love and life with Jesus at the centre, penetrating our present reality and reaching out to us, calling, drawing, willing us – the Church, Christ's body – into co-operating in the divine mission to make a little more of heaven on earth a reality.

An anecdote from Desmond Tutu again: He visited a religious community in Rome that had a Crucifix with a hand-less Christ hanging in its chapel. When he asked about it, he was told it was to remind the community that they are hands of Christ in the world, which is what we all are.

Quoting again from Rowan Williams' book: "When the Church is at its best, most clearly committed to the work of transforming the earth in which it lives, heaven becomes most clear."

To conclude:

The Book of the Acts of Apostles should perhaps be called Acts of the Holy Spirit because that more correctly captures the essence of its content. Book about action of the Spirit through the first disciples spreading the Gospel, building the kingdom, making "thy will be done on earth as in heaven" a reality.

There is a sense in which the Book of Acts is unfinished because the story has not been completed - we and all believers are still busy writing it, and the Ascension of Christ was a crucial chapter in that story.

References

Bible.org; Nathan Nettleton: LaughingBird.net; Orthodox Church in America online; *Tokens of Trust*, Rowan Williams, WJK Press, 2007

Ascension blessing

Go out into the world.
and in your words and in your lives
bear witness to the Christ who has ascended
to be everywhere present.

And as you come to know him,
may God give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation,
may Christ Jesus lift up his hands and bless you,
and may the Spirit open to you all the riches of Christ's inheritance. **Amen**

A reminder of some of the on-line worship resources available if you would like to log on:

1. St Peter's Cathedral has an online service that you can find here - <http://www.stpeters-cathedral.org.au/online-worship/> Or on the Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/StPetersCathedralAdelaide/>.
2. St Andrew's Walkerville have a livestreamed service at about 9.15 each Sunday - <https://www.facebook.com/StAndrewsChurchWalkerville/>
3. St John's, Halifax St live-streamed service at about 8.50 each Sunday - <https://www.facebook.com/Anglican-Parish-of-St-John-the-Evangelist-Adelaide-103507307960249/>
4. The Anglican Communion website (the International Anglican Church site) weekly worship:
<http://www.anglicannews.org/multimedia.aspx>

Declaration of Grace / Absolution

As Jesus Christ instructed his followers,
the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name
from the holy city to the ends of the earth.

Sisters and Brothers,
your sins are forgiven;
..be at peace.

Eucharistic Preface

The Lord is here. ***His Spirit is with us.***

Let us lift up our hearts. ***We lift them to the Lord.***

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. ***It is right to give our thanks and praise.***

It is indeed right to give you our thanks and praise, O God,
for you have called us to a rich hope
and a glorious inheritance among the saints.

You fixed the world in place
and rule over all from your sacred throne.
You formed a people for yourself
and through Moses and the prophets you spoke to them
of the Christ who fills all in all.

As it was written, he suffered and was killed,
but you raised him from the dead
and he walked again with his chosen ones,
speaking to them of your glorious kingdom.
You carried him into heaven on the clouds
and made him head over all things for the church,
seating him at your right hand
far above all rule and authority, power and dominion,
and above every name that is named,
not only in this age but also in the age to come.

Therefore with angels and archangels

Commission & Benediction

Go out into the world.
and in your words and in your lives
bear witness to the Christ who has ascended
to be everywhere present.

And as you come to know him,
may God give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation,
may Christ Jesus lift up his hands and bless you,
and may the Spirit open to you all the riches of Christ's inheritance.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
..... ***In the name of Christ. Amen.***