**Reflection 9: Jesus Ascends to His Father**

**Luke 24:44-53 & Acts 1:6-11**

**The Passages**

**Luke 24.44-53**

*44 Then he said to them, ‘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.’ 45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49And 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.’*

*50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

**Acts 1.6-11**

*6 So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ 7He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But 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.’ 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.’*

**The Reflection**

Have you ever wished you could be in two places at once? My guess is that you have, not least at this present time of lockdown. Stay at home, ok. But also be on a sunny beach? Only in the world of virtual reality I’m afraid.

Today’s passages from the end of Luke’s Gospel and the first chapter of Acts recount the story of Jesus’ Ascension – his final appearance in between Easter and Pentecost. To our surprise, perhaps, in telling of this event they simultaneously present us with a picture not of one reality but two.

In what might seem a truly strange story of Jesus rising into the clouds, never to be seen again, there are some fundamental truths to be found about God and about ourselves. For in the picture painted by Luke (the author of both the Gospel and of Acts), we glimpse nothing less than the intersection of heaven and earth.

Jesus – the resurrected Jesus – has reached end of his time with the disciples. He now must return to his Father, promising his followers that he won’t leave them alone but will send the Holy Spirit to empower them (as we shall celebrate in a week’s time at Pentecost). The Ascension is farewell.

**Looking Beyond**

To understand its meaning, however, we have to look beyond the event itself. Oddly enough, the place to start is not so much with the moment Jesus **as**cended: rather, we need to begin with the moment he **de**scended. We must begin with the fact that Jesus came down. As one hymn puts it: “From heaven you came, helpless babe…”

He came down to live a real earthly life, alongside real human beings in all their (our) messy reality. He became earthbound as we are earthbound, in order to walk the ground we walk, feel the fears we feel, know the joys we know, die the death we die. The Apostles Creed even says that “he descended to the dead”, to the lowest of the lowest place. As the great Dutch wartime Christian Corrie Ten Boom said: “there is no pit so deep that he is not deeper still.”

We can’t get to grips with the Ascension, then, until we grasp how powerful, how loving, how all-encompassing was his **de**scent. The limitless, all powerful God came down and bound himself to earth to be *where* we are, to be *who* and to be *what* we are - even to die our death. In descending he encompassed, embraced and experienced everything we are.

Once we realise the enormity of this, we can begin to glimpse the purpose of the Ascension. For in ascending, Jesus didn’t leave us high and dry, as his disciples feared. The opposite is true: he ascended to take us with him. Everything which he embraced as he came down, he then raised up. He ascended to lift us up with him into the presence of God. Everything we are, feel, think, do and desire; everything which makes us human Jesus has gathered up, transformed and taken to the heavenly places.

This is why the Ascension should never be seen as merely a minor festival. The Ascension is the culmination, the entire crowning glory, of Jesus’ ministry.

The whole purpose of God coming to us in Christ and dying and rising again is that we should never know or have to face life without God again. We should never have to know separation from God, either in this world or the next. Jesus returns to the Father in order that we, too, might be there right with him. He descended to live our life with us, and we ascend with Christ to live our lives in the presence of God.

**Here and Now**

But we need to be clear: it’s not a matter of waiting, as we might think, until we die. No, the Ascension is something for here and now. In some mysterious way we live our daily lives on earth, but at the same time by faith we are lifted up to take our place in God’s kingdom. We are here and we are there at the same time. Two places at once. Broughty Ferry *and* Barbados. Dundee *and* Dubai.

At this point it’s tempting to think this all sounds terribly abstract and theological. And at one level, it is. But our understanding can be enlarged by exploring what it might mean for our daily lives in the here and now.

First of all, the truth of the Ascension offers us reassurance - something we need the most when we’re not sure about the present or the future. Or when we’re not sure if God is really there for us as we face life’s hardest times. At these moments, we can sometimes feel very alone in our predicaments and very vulnerable indeed. But as one Christian writer who has undergone many trials in her life, and has had several reasons to feel alone and undefended, said about the Ascension: “it means that as long as I remain in him, I am where he is and he is where I am”.

“I am where he is, and he is where I am.” He is right there with us in our limitations and hurts, and he lifts all of us up into the glory of his infinite and eternal love. This means that the worst things that might happen *to* us are not the only things which are true *about* us. The Ascension reminds us that there is another, heavenly, truth which is just as valid and just as strong and just as solid as the hard and painful earthly ones we sometimes know. We can draw much reassurance from that.

Secondly, the Ascension places us firmly within the kingdom of God, not as a future experience but as a present reality. Looking ahead to Pentecost, Jesus tells his disciples: “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 all the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1, verse 8) But this promise, then still to be *fulfilled* for the disciples, is now for us the Church after Pentecost, a promise to be *claimed*. The Spirit makes the kingdom a transformative reality here and now.

**Room for Pentecost**

And so we can begin to know the power of the kingdom of God at work within us. When Jesus left the disciples in bodily form, he created room for Pentecost; for all the fulness of God and for the entire character of God’s kingdom to come and be breathed into his Church throughout the ages.

This means that all of God’s love, compassion and creative energy come to live in our hearts and lives. The way God sees and loves the world; the way God desires for us to live and to be with others - all of that takes up residence.

Ascension paves the way for that to happen. It paves the way for our citizenship in the kingdom of God to become a living thing which affects the way we live our earth-bound lives and touch the lives of others.

And so we get to live in two places at once after all. Bound by our earthly lives and bodies and circumstances on one hand, but at the same time ascended with Christ into the company of the omnipresent and eternal God.

Amazing and unfathomable? Perhaps. But true – yes! Ascension a minor festival? Definitely not.

**Francis Bridger**

**Some Interesting Points about the Ascension**

1. Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday because, as Acts 1, verse 3 indicates, Jesus’ Ascension occurred exactly 40 days after Easter Day. This timing unfortunately means that it almost always gets relegated to an “also-ran” status in most people’s minds (if they think of it at all). Fortunately, modern liturgies permit the Ascension Day readings to be transferred to the Sunday afterwards, hence our following them today.
2. Although the Ascension might seem a minor theme to us, this was not the case for the compilers of the Creeds. The early Church considered it significant enough to include it explicitly in the Nicene Creed, which is the most commonly used Creed, and also in the Apostles Creed – less commonly used. We don’t really have the luxury, therefore, of ignoring it, however strange the story might seem to our modern, scientific mindset.