

Easter 7/Sunday after Ascension Sunday 24th May 2020



Readings:

Acts 1:6-14 – The Ascension

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 towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They 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.’ Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. ‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one

Reflection

On Thursday, we celebrated the Ascension. What a mixture of emotions the disciples must have felt as they witnessed this cosmic event. The exhilaration of the resurrection and the joy of seeing Jesus in his resurrection body had sustained them over the weeks since the crucifixion but now he was leaving – again – and this time it was for good - or so it seemed. Although the angels' promise meant that this was not to be a final parting for the world, these disciples would never see Jesus again in this life and that must have brought them great sadness. But they also knew that they were witnessing his ultimate exaltation. Paradoxically, he had gone from them, was no longer in the world, and yet was closer to them than he had ever been. God, his father, had acknowledged all he had done on earth, accepted his sacrifice and now welcomed him back to his rightful place in heaven. As Jesus asked in our Gospel reading, God had glorified him. The disciples knew that the years they had devoted to his service were vindicated – and that, even without him, that ministry would continue and expand as they worked to bring his message to the rest of humanity. It was an enormous and daunting challenge. But as Jesus tells them, they were now fully equipped to follow his lead. “Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them.” This prayer is full of confidence for Jesus knows that his Father will give what he asks. And as well as learning from his teaching, Jesus wants his disciples to absorb that same confidence from him, so that they too will trust God to answer prayer. They had also had Jesus' example before them for three years. They knew exactly what was entailed in following him – what they lacked was the power to accomplish it – and all that would change at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would fill them with himself. After that, this little group of men – and women – would become the powerhouse of the Jesus movement and the Church would have begun. But they would not have accomplished what they did if they had not worked together, if they had not been a tight-knit community. Jesus did not leave his mission to one individual but to a group. And he prays here that his followers may be one, as he and his father are one. He might be able to encompass all the qualities needed for evangelism in one person, but no ordinary human being could do that. But by handing on his mission to a group, Jesus was founding a “ministry of all the talents.” The deficiencies of one disciple could be made good by the qualities of another. As Paul told the Corinthians, (1 Cor 12:12-27) the Christian church is a body and its members all have different functions. No one of us is able to do everything required to bring about Christ's kingdom on earth, but we do complement each other and if we work together we will succeed.

It may seem ironic, at this time, that I am preaching a church which is based on unity, community and corporate activity when all those things are hampered by our lockdown situation. But in an odd way, I think that we have as a Church – and I mean the whole Christian Church - shown a unity as never before. We have continued a ministry of prayer and pastoral care; we have continued to preach a Gospel that emphasises reliance on God and on his power to take away our fears and anxieties; and we have continued to witness to his presence in the world – even a world that seems to be overwhelmed by this dreadful pandemic. The Ascension reminds us that Christ is victorious; that he has assumed his kingly role and that he is in control. And if we can hold on to that certainty in this time of uncertainty, we will be making an important statement to the world about God's love and protection for us all.

Amen

Prayers

Today's Collect

O God the King of glory,
you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ
with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven:
we beseech you, leave us not comfortless,
but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us
and exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen

A Prayer for Ascension Day

Holy Father and loving Son,
I look for you in heaven
And I wait for you on earth.
Grant to all who accept your word
The joy of approaching you,
Now King but still Friend,
Exalted and yet still Brother to us all.
Amen

A Prayer for unity at this time

Even in the darkest moments, love gives hope, love compels us to fight against coronavirus
alongside our sisters and brothers living in poverty.
Love compels us to stand together in prayer with our neighbours near and far.
Love compels us to give and act as one.
Now it is clear that our futures are bound together more tightly than ever before.
As we pray in our individual homes – around the nation and around the world – we are
united as one family.
As we lift up our hearts together in prayer and thanksgiving.
Amen

Blessing

Christ, our exalted King
Pour upon you his abundant gifts
And bring you to reign with him in glory.
And the blessing of God almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen