

Trinity 5

Sunday 12th July 2020

Five Events that Shaped Christianity – Week 5

Event 4. Ascension – The Leaver who Remained



The Ascension, Rembrandt

Readings:

Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

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.'

John 7:32-39

The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering such things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple police to arrest him. Jesus then said, 'I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come.' The Jews said to one another, 'Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, "You will search for me and you will not find me" and, "Where I am, you cannot come"?'

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." ' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Reflection

And so this week, we move on to the Ascension, the last of our events in which Jesus was present in person, as it were. But when we move on to Pentecost next week, we will see that his presence was still very much felt even if it was not seen. But first, what does the Ascension tell us?

What happened?

Well, actually, not a lot; one moment he was there. The next he wasn't. End of. Except that in the Gospel story we often find that an ending is also a beginning. It might have seemed like the end to the disciples but a new chapter in our story of Jesus was beginning. For now, he is seated at the right hand of God. That doesn't mean he put God on his left. (Athanasius) This is a theological point – not a geographical one and about spiritual rather than physical space, simply telling us how close and united are Father and Son. But it also begins a new chapter for the disciples. The resurrection appearances and the times they had shared with their risen master had almost been a "honeymoon period" but now that was over. They had had several interesting meetings and conversations – but what were the disciples feeling now as, after the initial joy of Easter, they see him disappear from view – bemused, frustrated, expectant? Again, they – and we - are in uncharted territory. They know for certain that he has "left." Or at least will no longer be with them in the old way. But in a way, this has "cleared the decks" and has paved the way for them to get down to work. It has opened up new horizons and allowed them to spread their own wings and see if they can fly alone without the watchful eye of Jesus upon them. (Please excuse the mixed metaphors.) So we can see right away that this is an event just as significant as those that preceded it ...

What does it mean?

Yes, Jesus **has** left – but to return home as conquering hero. The resurrection appearances were wonderful but vaguely unreal and couldn't go for ever. There had to be an end as the incarnation came full circle and Jesus returned to his heavenly Father. So did that mean the job was done? No, not yet, not entirely. But Jesus was now in his rightful place and the disciples realised that he was indeed Lord of all. That conviction later empowered Christians to hold on to their faith against the temporal authorities who persecuted them. Though we do not face the same persecution, our task is the same - to proclaim by our life, words and actions that he is indeed our Lord – and Lord of all.

But we saw with event 1 and the incarnation, that Jesus does affirm us and our identity. He affirmed us when he chose to take on our human nature but now his ascension further affirms us, because Jesus has taken our human nature into heaven. We don't have to apologise for being "only human" because Jesus has shown us that humanity now has a place at God's side which he has won for us. The Ascension is not about Jesus' absence from us but his presence with us. Jesus said "it is to your advantage that I go away..." (John 16:7) because his exaltation meant his spirit is now available for all time. And it is the joy of every believer to discover that presence for him/herself.

As Lord of all, it is true that *He's got the whole world in his hands*, as we often sing. Jesus is Lord but not in the way the world imagines lordship. He is a servant monarch, working always and everywhere through love. From his new command post in heaven, he is working for us that we may prosper and thrive and live the lives he wants for us. What he achieved on the cross, Christ now makes a reality for us, here and now. "The truth about God is not so much that he is omnipotent as that he is inexhaustible. And for that reason, he will always succeed." (John V Taylor)

What does it mean for us now?

Christ's exaltation at the Ascension has brought us many benefits. For a start, we now have a friend in high places as it were, a man in heaven, a great high priest who has passed through the heavens. (Hebrews 4:14-15) But the fact that he is in "high places" does not distance him from us. We cannot comprehend or begin to cope with the immensity of his present glory; or could not except that Christ has made himself accessible to us through the humble elements of bread and wine. He is our ever-present friend and companion as well as our king.

And through his commission to the disciples we now have clarity of purpose - a clear job description. Jesus had worked himself out of a job and now handed it over to a band of seemingly unreliable deputies - but there was no plan B. He trusted them to get on with it, and now trusts us to do the same. They may have found the task of evangelising the world overwhelming but Jesus had given them the key in his parable of the mustard seed. If we begin with the small things, they will grow. Whatever the task, great or small, our duty is to respond with love and generosity - but always with our confidence resting in him.

All that Jesus achieved, culminating in this epic Ascension event, often leaves us speechless. Language is often inadequate to express our feelings. And that is a good time to pray. For prayer can be wordless - it can begin in stillness and end in silence. And silence is often the best way of encountering God. There are many different methods of prayer at our disposal* and used meaningfully, they all bring gifts beyond language. And despite his "departure" it is that wonderful gift of prayer that continues to connect us to our wonderful Saviour, who has left, but who remains, and continues to pour his blessings into our hearts through his Spirit.

Amen

* E.g - *Praying through nature: Lectio Divina: Ignatian Meditation: the Examen: contemplative or centring prayer.*

Prayers

Today's Collect

Almighty and everlasting God,
by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church
is governed and sanctified:
hear our prayer which we offer for all your faithful people,
that in their vocation and ministry
they may serve you in holiness and truth
to the glory of your name;
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen

A Prayer for the Ascension

Almighty and eternal God,
bless us as we celebrate the Ascension
and direct our eyes heavenward
where in human flesh, your only Son is with you;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Adapted from Leonine Sacramentary, Ascension, Fifth Century

A personal Ascension Prayer for these times of Pandemic

Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your disciples,
"I am with you always"
Be with me today, as I offer myself to you.
Hear my prayers for others and for myself,
and keep me in your care that I may know your presence even in the present time of trial.
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