

The Ascension.

Just in case you didn't know the book of Acts is the 2nd book written by Luke to Theophilus. The Gospel of Luke was written as an account of eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus and was intended to illustrate that the faith of all believers, not just the Jews, could be accepted by God. It is based upon the life and teachings of Jesus that needed to be preached worldwide. Acts on the other hand was written as an account of how the early Christian Church came into being. From the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, to the mission journeys of Paul.

However, the end of The Gospel of Luke and the beginning Book of Acts are virtually the same. They both speak about the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. Although the Ascension occupies a place on the church's calendar. It is not generally thought of as being important by some theologians because none of the other gospel writers mention it at all. It seems to be overshadowed by Good Friday and outshone by the glory of Easter Morning. Unfortunately, this means that many Christians miss the tremendous truth that the Ascension of Jesus has to teach us.

It takes place 40 days after the resurrection of Jesus, and 10 days before Pentecost. Historians and theologians tell us that this was no accidental timing because 40 in the Bible generally symbolizes a period of testing, trial and then, finally, **triumph**. It was 40 years that the Israelites were in the desert before entering the Promised Land and at the beginning of Jesus ministry straight after he was baptised by John, he was tempted by the devil for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert.

The first 3 verses of our reading, tells us that those 40 days of Jesus appearing after the resurrection were different to the others because they were of immense value to the believers, for they established the reality that Jesus was alive and was indeed Lord of all.

You see, A single sighting of the risen Christ could and would have been open to questions, but the continuous encounters that the disciples had with Him, removed any doubts from even the most skeptical among them and gave them assurance of his power and authority. Each time Jesus appeared to them, he was teaching them something that would get them through the coming days and weeks.

As we have heard over the last few weeks, he helped Thomas to overcome his doubts, walked and talked and taught with the 2 men on the road to Emmaus, He reinstated Peter after he had betrayed him, and now he was telling them that he was going to leave them, but they must stay in Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus commanded them to stay put.

Now there wasn't many times that Jesus commanded his disciples to do anything, most of the time He showed them, either by a parable or a miracle, teaching them why and how to act and as a result they would not fall into the trappings of dubious characters., so this statement must have been especially important, and they needed to take it seriously. What they didn't know at the time was that Jesus was protecting them because He knew just how hard it was going to be for them to be left alone until the Holy Spirit came to them. And just in case they didn't understand

fully about the coming of the Holy Spirit Jesus referred back to John the Baptist and how he had baptised with water. And now they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit, who is the Power of God.

This passage shows us that being Baptised with water is important at the beginning of your Christian life, but to continue to walk in the ways of God you need to be baptised by the Holy Spirit, because He is the only way that God shows his power in and through us and keeps us in step with what God wants us to do.

Yet did the disciples understand, no they still didn't know what all this meant, they still questioned him of the Jewish belief that He would restore the Kingdom to Israel, and yet again Jesus had to patiently tell them that they would not know the time or date that he would return again, that was up to His Father, but until such a time they would have the power of the Holy Spirit to help them to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth.

In the middle of the passage there is one verse, verse 9, we could be forgiven for just reading it and not recognising the importance of the verse. ***After he had said this, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight.*** It doesn't come with any triumph, its just there, but I think it is one of the most powerful verses we could read.

One minute Jesus was there talking to them and the next he was rising on a cloud to heaven and was hidden. Gone. And they were left staring into the sky. Jesus had gone back to His Father, as miraculously as he had been born 33 years earlier. Imagine you are one of the disciples, what do you think your feeling would have been? Excited? Scared? Apprehensive? Remember you had been with Jesus for the last 3 years, listened to him, ate with him, followed him, had seen him crucified on a cross, dead, buried in a tomb, risen from the grave, touched his pierced hand and side, broke bread, ate fish with him and now you have just seen him ascending to heaven to be with the Father. I think I probably would have been overwhelmed, sad but excited at what was to come.

Sometimes we forget that Luke was a doctor therefore he was a practical person. He tells the readers of the disciples, with their eyes straining to catch the last glimpse of the cloud as it rose with their Lord. Not noticing the two heavenly beings that had slipped quietly alongside them until they spoke. Acts 1 v 11 ***men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.***

The Ascension testifies to the fact of our Lord Jesus will return one day, It gives us assurance that God is working his purposes out for His whole creation and when he is ready our Lord will return, just as he ascend and this time it won't be in private, Revelation 1v7 tells us that he will come again with clouds and every eye will see him, and 1 Thessalonians 4 v 13 says, He ascended alone, but will return in the company of millions of the redeemed from all ages.

The question we have to ask ourselves is, how are we using the time we have until Jesus returns? Are we fulfilling the ministries that he has given to each one of us? We have been placed here where we are for a purpose, the angelic beings, asked the disciples 'why do you stand her looking into the sky'. It was to the earth not the

sky that they should have been looking at, to be witnesses not stargazers! Our calling is not to look upward in nostalgia, but to look outward in compassion to a lost world that needs Jesus.

There are 3 things that the Ascension clarifies for us.

Historically, it assures us of the completed work of Christ,

Spiritually it teaches us of our Lord's triumphant entry into heaven and his continuing ministry to the Father on our behalf and last but not least

Practically, it reminds us of the second coming of Jesus to judge the world and the need for us to be ready at all times to give an

Account of our stewardship. Let us rejoice in the Ascension of Jesus for without it we wouldn't have the Holy Spirit to guide us, we wouldn't have the second coming to look forward to, and we wouldn't have Jesus who now sits at the right hand of God interceding for us.. Amen