

Sermon for Ascension Sunday

Swavesey – Acts 1:6-14, 1 Peter 4 and 5, John 17:1-11

Lord, you have raised our human nature to the throne of heaven. Open our hearts and minds to your voice, that we may hear your message to us today.
Amen.

Today, we have a rich and full set of readings that encourage us to reflect on significant questions: the Ascension of Jesus, the coming of the Spirit, and our mission as followers of Christ.

And the first of these questions is: why? Why did Jesus have to be, as we read in the Book of Acts, taken up to heaven? To us, Christians, it may seem obvious: Jesus was not just resurrected to die again, but to live forever. Jesus had to be exalted because he is God incarnate, and he lives now. He is among us.

But for the disciples, the answer was not so obvious, because their friend Jesus came back in the flesh, with his physical wounds and his human needs. He shared food with them, he ate like them, walked with them, drank with them and continued to teach them.

This could have gone on for a very long time. Especially because the Jews in First Century Palestine were waiting for the Kingdom of God to be restored in Israel. For them, the Resurrection marked the end of an era, and the start of a new time, the time when Israel would be restored to full glory.

But even they, the disciples who lived for many years with Jesus and were taught by him, did not immediately understand that God was preparing them for yet another dimension of his presence among them. They believed in the Almighty, they knew Jesus as a friend, they would now receive the Spirit of God, the one who remains with us always.

The disciples ask: 'Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' And in effect, Jesus answers: 'No, not me; *you* are going to do that; *you* are going to be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.' And as followers of Christ, this message is for *us* too. *We* are Jesus' witnesses here, in our local community, in our places of work, wherever we travel, even online, through our presence on social media.

The Ascension not only shows the omnipotence of God, but is also a passing on of the baton, very much like a relay race. It was now up to the disciples to tell others about everything they'd seen and learnt from Jesus. And thanks to them, we are here today, gathered in the name of Christ, continuing the mission that started all those centuries ago.

But the immensity of Christ being glorified and reunited with the Father is really hard to take in.



The language is confusing: Jesus is 'taken up', the disciples are 'looking into the sky'. As if heaven and earth were two separate places. I must confess I love the paintings of the Ascension that show a little cloud and two feet poking out. They're gorgeous and quite funny.

But heaven is not a separate place. Heaven is God's dimension of the created order, God's reality, God's own time. Earth is the dimension of space, time, and matter that we know. So the Ascension stretches our minds and imaginations further than we would normally like. We who live in our dimension struggle to adjust to God's new world. That is part of the challenge of the gospel.

The language of Ascension is also confusing because it gives the impression that God and Jesus are different.

But we know Father and Son to be one and only God. Indeed, in John's Gospel, Jesus reaffirms his unity with the Father: 'Father', he says, 'glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.' 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (...) The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory.'

The point Jesus is making is that as God, he has finished the work he came to do. And now, it is our turn to do God's work on earth. And God knows it is difficult. In his first letter, Peter the apostle writes to his friends to say: 'Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you'. He tells

them that all sorts of obstacles will be on their way. Today, we too are faced with difficulties, we too are insulted because of the name of Christ, we too know the enemy, in the shape of corporate greed, personal interest, selfishness and indifference. We too face the obstacles of a materialistic life, of consumerism, of the neglect of God's creation.

But, Peter says, our God is the God of all grace who calls us to his eternal glory in Christ. He is the one who, by his Spirit, equips us, restores us, makes us strong, firm, and steadfast.

So how do we understand this sequence: the Ascension, the coming of the Spirit, and our being equipped to do God's work?

The Ascension of Jesus is not a departure and even less an abandonment, it is the affirmation of the grace of God: the victory of life eternal over death. And it is a test of trust. The disciples had to trust in the promise from God: you will receive the Holy Spirit. It is a test of patience. Like the disciples, we are called to wait before we go out and act. God is calling us to "be" rather than "do" for a while.

Waiting can be difficult, but it is not inactive. When Jesus ascended to the Father, we read in the Book of Acts that the apostles joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

As they gave themselves room for imagining the future through prayer, so can we reflect on our ability to actively pursue our mission in the world.

On Thursday, Ascension day, we started the ten days of prayer for the movement called Thy Kingdom Come. Called to 'Light up the world in prayer', each of us is encouraged to pray that the Spirit of God will work in the lives of five people who have not yet responded to God's call. We're also invited to use a Prayer Journal, there are hard copies, but you can also download your own copy.

This time of waiting, between Ascension and Pentecost, is a time of hope and commitment.

Hope because through the Ascension of Christ, what happened on the cross was reunited with God. And at Pentecost, we remember that we are united

with God through the Spirit. We receive the Spirit afresh. So we are caught up in the love of the Trinity, the movement of grace that is all encompassing and brings us closer to God.

And commitment because in this special time, we too are called to spend more time in worship, in sharing, and in fellowship.

This is one more opportunity to reflect on what God is calling us to do and to deepen our faith.

Like the apostles, we are called to find new ways of caring for each other and imagining how to be church. We may not know what the future holds, but we do have the promise that the Spirit *will* empower our witness.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, God incarnate,
As we obey your command
and wait for the coming of the Spirit,
keep us open to your voice,
Nurture in us the desire to pray,
knowing that we pray together, as a Christian community,
in an act of solidarity, just like the first disciples.
Make us attentive to your presence,
that no matter what we do, and what goes on around us,
we may bear witness to your love and grace.

Amen