

Let's pray together.

God our Father we thank you so much for your word the Bible and as we read it together and we think about what it means we pray that you would bless us and help us speak to us by your Holy Spirit into our hearts to enable us to live as disciples of Jesus For it's in His name that we pray. Amen.

There's a mysterious truth that sounds so strange to contemporary people but, which is revealed in the Bible, which is that to say that God is invisible is not the same as saying that God is absent. In fact one of the core themes that runs right through the whole Bible is that God is present with his people.

If we look for example at the story of Moses and we see in Exodus chapter 3 God sending Moses to Pharaoh. One of the reassurances for Moses is God says "I will be with you". And in fact later in Exodus chapter 33 Moses pleaded with God to learn from him to learn his ways and God says "my presence will be with you" and Moses says "well if your presence doesn't go with us don't send us from this place because what else would distinguish us from the other people on the face of the earth.

"If your presence does not go with us then don't send us anywhere". And this idea of the presence of God continues as a vital theme throughout the rest of the Old Testament and it seems very clear to me that Jesus, when the disciples of Jesus encountered him and saw everything that he did and said, they discovered that the presence of God was with them in a special way in the person of Jesus, in a human being, And so they knew that he truly was Immanuel: God with us.

Now our reading from Acts chapter 1 today we come to the end of the story the presence of God in human form in Jesus. We come to the Ascension of Jesus and as people living in this strange cultural landscape we inhabit now of lockdown and when all that seems to have been normal in our lives has been taken away, perhaps we can appreciate with particular empathy the strangeness of the world to the disciples in Acts chapter 1.

For a number of years it's been normal for them to walk the earth learning from Jesus watching him spending all their time on their discipleship but this normal has been taken away by the earth-shattering event of the crucifixion and although Jesus has risen again the resurrection hasn't brought back the old normal but has placed them into a new normal which is not quite the same.

Jesus is with them in person. He meets them in the upper room and then he disappears again. He walks with them on the road to Emmaus and goes in to eat with them and then he disappears again and one could imagine that all the times when Jesus is with them they're excited and learning from him but then when he disappears again they're thinking to themselves: 'when's he going to be back; when is he going to turn up again; when is he going to appear?'

And we get no sense in this post-resurrection pre-ascension time that they have any plans of their own except perhaps a little fishing. Jesus had arrived to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as king and he had been crucified but then his resurrection had vindicated him as Lord and Messiah so that on the day of Pentecost when Peter's preaching he says "This God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah", so perhaps it's natural that they ask him in Acts chapter 1 verse 6: "Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? here you are as king; what's your plan? What are you going to do now?" And perhaps you've noticed that in the Gospels when people ask Jesus a question they often find that his response is not quite the answer that they had expected. They've asked Jesus what are you going to do now, and his response is to say to them: "Well what are you going to do now?" He has a mission for them. His mission is that they are to be his witnesses in

Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and in Bradford West Yorkshire. Well he actually says to the ends of the earth but Bradford would have seemed like the ends of the earth to those Disciples back then.

I wonder what would have happened had he given them this mission and then not ascended into heaven? Suppose he had just disappeared and not reappeared?

Perhaps I can give a very, very simple little illustration. Here in my study you might notice on the wall behind me I've got some kite string and that's connected to a couple of kites that are attached to the ceiling in my study. Growing up in Karachi in Pakistan I spent many, many hours as a young person, as a child, flying kites and fighting kites with my friends and there's a special way to attach the kite string to a Pakistani kite because the kite is delicate, just made of tissue paper and thin pieces of bamboo. And I had an older friend who had attached the string to the kite for me and I would always go to him when I had a new kite and he would attach it for me.

But one day his family moved away from Karachi and I found that I now had to put into practice the skills I learned from him and I could no longer look to him for when he would come and fix the tie to the kite string for me. What the disciples really needed was a decisive departure from Jesus in order that they might know that this is now the end and that the mission has passed on to them.

And so by sending into heaven through the clouds Jesus not only makes the connection with Daniel chapter 7, which you might want to look at later, but he also is able to indicate to them the Disciples that they need to press on with the mission he's giving them.

They are to be his witnesses and that same mission that was given to that first generation of Christians is the mission that's given to the church and therefore to us today.

We used to sing a Sunday school song. It said "Jesus bids us shine with a pure fair light / like a little candle burning in the night / sin and want and sorrow/ yet we must shine / you in your small corner / and I in mine". The disciples found themselves without the physical presence of Jesus for the first time, and the task must have seemed, and in fact it was, enormously difficult: far too difficult for them.

Jesus had not said to them that they would do this in their own strength. He had not said to them that now there was no need for the presence of God. On the contrary. Before commissioning them as witnesses he said to them you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses.

And so Ascension Day inevitably looks forward to Pentecost in ten days time and we too, seeking to be obedient to the call of Jesus on our lives, we too should be aware trying to do so in our own strength, because that way always leads to failure and disappointment. We read in Acts chapter 1 verse 14 that the Disciples joined constantly together in prayer and if we are inheritors of the mission of the church, if they needed prayer and the presence of God, how much more than Moses and they do we need the presence of God by His Holy Spirit?

That's why I love the 'Thy Kingdom Come' initiative which begins today. It challenges us to make these 10 days from Ascension to Pentecost, days dedicated to prayer, to seeking the presence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit for our witness in the world; while we await the return of this Jesus who has gone into Heaven.

Let's bow our heads to pray. Holy Spirit we welcome your presence with us, and we ask you to come and strengthen us, for the work to which you have called us. For we pray in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

