

Acts 1:1-11 Jesus Taken Up Into Heaven

¹ In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has

been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴ He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

The Ascension of Jesus

⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

488 words

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.

The last moment that the disciples had with Jesus and there are these two blokes on the scene. Where did they come from? Does Thomas nudge Nathaniel and whisper, "who are they?"

If they were who I think they were, did Peter nudge James and John and whisper "look whose turned up again."

The same author wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. There is a linguistic and stylistic continuity, it's part one and part two of the same story. The Actions of Jesus, the Actions of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.

In Luke there are significant moments as the story moves from one area and set of actions to another and one such pivotal moment is the Transfiguration.

Luke chapter 9. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain and is transfigured. Two men, Moses and Elijah appear in glorious splendour and they talk with Jesus about his exodus from Jerusalem which he is about to fulfil.

We know it's Moses and Elijah because we are specifically told that's who it is.

Luke chapter 24 the scene with the women at the empty tomb

⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do

you look for the living among the dead?⁶ He is not here; he has risen!

Here at the Ascension and the last moment with Jesus something similar occurs...

suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky?"

A scholar called Jared Hay argues very convincingly that the three occasions when the two men appear are all appearances of Moses and Elijah.

Moses led the people from slavery in Egypt to freedom.

Elijah fought the battle against evil and to maintain a true and sincere faith.

Had we lots of time I could present to you all the arguments Jared Hay uses... language that resonates with the OT stories of the two men, imagery - like clouds, lightening and other proofs...but I'm left with wondering why – why those two? What is the point?

What did it mean to Jesus? What did it mean to the Disciples? What does it mean for us today?

I think the appearance of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration was to strengthen and advise Jesus on the coming conflict. Moses and Elijah are not angels, not spirits they were and are human as was Jesus and they too went through suffering and conflict and trial and both overcame. As one author puts it, they come from the heavenly court to encourage Jesus.

These two men are colossal figures of the Old Testament. They would remind Jesus of all that God had done and would speak of what was to come.

What about the Disciples? I think it is another authentication of who Jesus was and his unique importance. The two greatest figures in Jewish history are there to support Jesus and then play some part in the final scenes of Jesus life. It's almost as if time and space have no meaning...these two historic figures are suddenly present.

Imagine the discussion among the disciples having been present when Moses and Elijah appear. I wonder if Thomas didn't believe it was them?

Its like in the star wars films when Obi-Wan-Kenobi suddenly turns up.

Moses and Elijah are present at the end of Jesus mission as his exodus is literally taking place, his ascension.

They move the story on by moving the disciples on. Don't stand here staring at the sky.

I think for both the disciples and for us there is another metaphor because these two men are on the scene.

Moses was not going to live a supernatural life and lead the nation for hundreds of years. He had a successor ready. The leadership mantel passed from Moses to Joshua who led the people into the promised land.

And Elijah had a successor ready called Elisha. Elijah knows his time is coming to an end and he asks Elisha what blessing he would like. Elisha asks for a double portion of the Spirit Elijah has.

Elijah answers that if Elisha sees him being taken up to heaven, his request will be granted.

Can you see the similarity. Elijah is standing with the disciples watching Jesus being taken up to heaven, just as Elisha stood and watched him being taken up to heaven and what is on offer is the gift of the Spirit.

Our author of Luke and Acts is drawing very clear parallels for us because they are there to be drawn...

And the final lesson becomes clear.

Moses handed on to Joshua.

Elijah handed on the Elisha.

Jesus is handing on to you and to all of us and to equip us for service we too are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Think about this as a baton race, a relay race.

Moses and Elijah, then Jesus, then St. Peter and the 11 others, and on and on from one generation to the next. It's tempting to look at those near the beginning of the race and be so in awe that we don't feel we can be mentioned in the same breath. But the positioning of these two men, their appearance is to re-assure us that they are like us and we are like them and fulfilling the mission is utterly impossible unless we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, as they were.

A prayer attributed to Teresa of Avila says this.

God of love, help us to remember,

that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,

no hands but ours, no feet but ours.

Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world.

Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now.

Ours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good.

Thinking of the disciples staring into the sky, I'm struck by the line in the prayer, ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world. Not to gaze longingly into space as if Jesus were about to return, but to look around and see what is required of us here and now.

The question the disciples asked – are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel – may have led the disciples to do nothing, simply expecting Jesus' return and the fulness of God's kingdom to be ushered in. Jesus diverts their attention from speculation to a new experience, that of power from on high, the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Between Ascension and Pentecost are 10 days a period Karl Barth calls a 'significant pause' a time for the church to wait and pray.

So how do we embrace this in the remaining days up to Pentecost. What is our waiting? What is our hoping? What do we pray?

I've chosen a song to follow and I think it captures our response to Ascension.

Good Shepherd of my soul,
Come dwell within me;
Take all I am and mould
Your likeness in me.
Before the cross of Christ,

This is my sacrifice:
A life laid down and ready to follow.

The troubled find their peace
In true surrender;
The prisoners their release
From chains of anger.
In springs of living grace
I find a resting place
To rise refreshed and ready to follow.

I'll walk this narrow road
With Christ before me,
Where thorns and thistles grow
And cords ensnare me.
Though doubted and denied,
He never leaves my side,
But lifts my head and calls me to follow.

And when my days are gone,
My strength is failing,
He'll carry me along
Through death's unveiling.
Earth's struggles overcome,
Heaven's journey just begun
To search Christ's depths and ever to follow.

Our prayers are to be filled again with the Holy Spirit, to be renewed and refreshed and equipped for service and to pick up the baton again and continue to follow, however awesome the task might appear.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 12 May 2024

