

Ascension of Jesus

Sunday 24 April 2009

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Readings:

Acts 1: 1 – 11

Psalm 47

Luke 24: 50 – 53

Sermon

Today is the first Sunday after Ascension Day (Thursday) but how many of us actually celebrate Jesus' Ascension? We celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas, we celebrate his death on the cross on Good Friday, we celebrate his resurrection when he rose from the dead and left the garden tomb on Easter Sunday and we also celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit at Whitsun/Pentecost but what about his ascension?

Unfortunately celebration of Jesus' ascension tends to get overlooked perhaps because it falls on a Thursday and yet it is an equally essential part of our belief in Christ as the other festivals. The ascension actually completes the cycle:

- Jesus came down to earth as a child born to Mary and Joseph.
- Later Jesus started his ministry on earth calling together 12 disciples to teach them about his father as well as help him in his ministry.
- He was crucified on the cross and was buried.
- On the third day he rose from the dead and for the next 40 days appeared many times to his disciples, he ate with them; they saw his wounds they even touched him and he continued to teach them.
- Finally when his work on earth was done he ascended to heaven - in other words he returned to his Father.

Sadly many people still have a view that God is hidden somewhere 'up there' in heaven looking down on us. The account of Jesus' ascension sort of reinforces this view of 'God up there' and us 'down here'. In verse 9 of Acts 1 Luke tells us *"After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight".* We are also told that the disciples *"were looking intently up into the sky as he was going."*

The cloud that obscured the view of Jesus from the sight of the disciples was not one those black clouds that all too often obscure our view of the sun, especially on Bank Holidays or weekends, and bring us miserable weather. No, this cloud symbolised the glory of God!

We need to remember that in the Old Testament, God often made his presence known to the people by appearing in a cloud. For example in Exodus 13: 21:

"By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way"

And Exodus 19: 9:

'The LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you."

And when Moses ascended the mountain to meet with God and receive the Ten Commandments the mountain top was covered in thick cloud.

It was also a cloud that enveloped Jesus and the three disciples at Jesus' transfiguration as a visible sign to the disciples of God's presence with them:

'While Jesus was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"' (Matthew 17: 5)

So when Jesus returned to heaven, he returned in a cloud that took him out of their sight for it was essential the disciples saw Jesus make this transition back to the glory of heaven. So the ascension would confirm to them, in case they still could have any lingering doubts, that Jesus truly was the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

It was also of the utmost importance that the disciples witnessed Jesus' ascension so that they knew for definite that he had indeed physically left earth and had returned to his heavenly home.

But there are some though who doubt the ascension and I'm sure that pictures of the ascension, which can be a little surreal with Jesus rising upwards in a 'beam me up Scotty' type of image familiar to many Sci-fi movies, don't help.

But John Stott has this to say about this in his commentary on Acts:

"The visible, historical ascension had a readily intelligible purpose. Jesus had no need to take a journey in space, and it is silly of some critics to ridicule his ascension by representing him as the first cosmonaut. No, in the transition from his earthly to his heavenly state, Jesus could perfectly well have vanished, as on other occasions, and 'gone to the Father' secretly and invisibly. The reason for a public and visible ascension is surely that he wanted them to know that he had gone for good. During the forty days he had kept appearing and disappearing and reappearing. But now this interim period was over. This time his departure was final. So they were not to wait around for his next resurrection appearance. Instead they were to wait for somebody else, the Holy Spirit."

Jesus' work on earth was accomplished and the responsibility for continuing the work he had started with them now passed to the disciples who were eyewitnesses to all he did during his ministry here on earth. From this point on they were no longer referred to as 'disciples' meaning 'learners' but 'apostles' meaning 'messengers' or 'envoys' which reflected the significant change in their role.

But did they really understand the significance of Jesus' ascension and the responsibility that now passed to them as they stood looking into the sky? Probably not! - for they remained looking into the sky until two men dressed in white suddenly appeared and asked:

'.....why do you stand there 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.' (Acts 1: 11.)

They seemed to need prompting into action to be told there is work to be done so stop wasting your time searching the heavens for Jesus do as he has instructed you! Perhaps there are times when we also need prompting to get on with the work God has given us to do and not waste time stargazing – waiting for something else to happen, more instruction, clearer ideas of the task given us etc

But how could these weak, unsure, frightened disciples who deserted him in the Garden of Gethsemane possibly take on their new responsibilities? The task was daunting Jesus had begun the work but he paid for it with his life – they had learnt such a lot from him but there was so much more for them to learn if they were to accomplish the mission they had been given.

An example of this need to learn more is demonstrated when, shortly before his ascension, they asked him:

"Lord are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1: 6)

So despite the additional teaching they received from Jesus after his resurrection the disciples still seemed unsure about the true meaning of Jesus as the Messiah and His Kingdom.

In Jesus' response to them he is really telling them not to worry about such matters but just get on with the task they have been given:

"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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." (Acts 1: 7 – 8)

The Holy Spirit would be the crucial difference for once they received that gift they would be operating in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. They would no longer be alone the gift of the Holy Spirit would transform them from frightened confused people to fearless people who could speak with power, authority and conviction so much so that they were not afraid to die in order to do the work Jesus had given them - but that is jumping forward to next week and Pentecost.

Luke describes the ascension at the end of his Gospel and at the beginning of his record of the Acts of the Apostles for it is both an ending and a new beginning.

The life begun by the supernatural birth ends with the supernatural ascension, which sets the seal of Heaven on Christ's claims and work. But the ascension is also the starting point of Christ's heavenly activity - the growth of His Church here on earth.

Luke, in his opening words to Acts, makes it clear his Gospel (and indeed the other Gospels) was a record of "... *all that Jesus began to do and teach until he was taken up to heaven.*" (Acts 1: 1) Jesus began the work those he taught would now have to continue that work.

That was the task Jesus gave the disciples:

"..... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1: 8)

That is the task that passes to all who believe in Jesus Christ, including us. The Good News of Jesus Christ is not knowledge that we have to keep to ourselves; it isn't like joining a secret society like, say, the Freemasons. In stark contrast it is knowledge to be shared, for it is only through sharing our knowledge of Christ that we can truly claim to be Christians.

Like those disciples first given the task we may feel inadequate but as Brian said last week:

"Here in this Church today are Christian people who have never seen Jesus, but have met him nonetheless ... through reading the Bible and the fellowship of the Church ... and through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives ... people who witness to him by what they do as well as by what they say."

Being a Christian is a way of life, it's about how we live our lives not about merely attending church. We do not all have the same calling but we are all called to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ and we can do that in so many different ways.

That is the strength of the church, that is why the early church grew rapidly, that is why the church will continue to grow and why even now people will endure ridicule or, in extreme cases, persecution in order to live a Christian life.

But through the gift and power of the Holy Spirit we can and must accomplish the task passed to us on his ascension, whatever the individual tasks may be, so that we may be witnesses for Christ to the ends of the earth!