

Sermon 13 May 2021 Ascension

Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:44-53

It's lovely to be here with you this morning. To be here in what Mark has re-named 'The Open Church'. The space that has been filled with a series of exhibitions, ranging from our own experiences of lockdown last summer, enhanced by Letty's inspired choices of complementary paintings, through rewordings of Psalm 23, and then a rolling change of the church seasons through art and poetry. Culminating in the current one of Easter to Pentecost.

I have loved coming in here, sitting quietly and absorbing what has been on offer and reflecting on the truths in the pictures and the words.

Today, as we celebrate Ascension, having listened to the words of Luke in both our gospel reading and in Acts, I would like us to spend some time looking at the words of Malcolm Guite and the painting by Peter Rogers. Both modern interpretations of our readings. They are hanging half way along the south aisle. And you will have picked up a copy as you came in.

Let us look at the painting first. It's from the Methodist Collection of Modern Art and was painted in 1963 and for those of you who like this sort of detail, it is approximately 4ft x 3ft.

In the centre of the picture Jesus ascends in a whitish-gold cloud, his feet already off the ground, arms raised upwards and his head thrust back, almost horizontally, in profile, in a style reminiscent of William Blake. On the left, the two figures clad in white are standing in the embrace of a deep-red flame that descends from the heavens and curves beneath them, while on the right a group of disciples, undifferentiated except perhaps for Mary in a brown robe, gaze upwards as Jesus is lost to view within the cloud and ascends to heaven. This all takes place against a black and inky background with a faint glow on the horizon.

What do you see in it? What is your eye drawn to?

What might you feel if you were one of the disciples?

The clouds point back to the time when the presence of God was with the Israelites in the journeying in the wilderness, and to the story as recounted by Luke in Acts.

The deep-red flames may be a representation of the Holy Spirit and the flames that will come on the crowds at Pentecost.

What is depicted is a moment in time. A moment that captures heaven and earth coming together. And it is also a moment when the disciples are captured looking upwards before the figures in dazzling white have issued their challenge. And maybe those figures in white are looking out of the painting, looking at us, issuing the same challenge to us.

Malcolm Guite then moves us forward. His poem captures that sense of being rooted still in time and place. He tells of what Jesus had accomplished and tells of how we pick up his mantle and become his clouds of witness.

Read the poem

Jesus' heart breaks for the broken hearted.

Jesus gives his light to us.

We, in the words of the prayer we will pray after communion, are given his light and are asked to bring his light into the world. We are asked to sing the waning darkness into light.

Which sometimes feels like a tall order. Sometimes it feels better, safer, to stay fixed in the time and space of staring upwards. Instead, the Holy Spirit calls us, as Kandis reminded us on Sunday, to a fresh understanding of what love, peace and joy means.

For Heaven is God's space and Earth is ours. And whilst worshiping the ascended Jesus is great, we know that Luke has told us of Jesus' ministry – how he said that:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free'.

The rest of Acts tells how his followers continued his teaching and his ministry. And our gospel today tells of him appointing his followers as witnesses throughout the earth. An inheritance that is ours.

Because the Ascension doesn't mean that Jesus is now absent. Rather that the power of the Holy Spirit is released into the world. In a sense Ascension is every day and we can recommit to its power every day.

It's all too easy isn't it to say that a fresh understanding is needed by others. It grieves us to watch the same battles being fought, looking at Israel and Gaza. Yet the only real fresh understanding we can have is within ourselves as individuals and as a community.

Jesus' heart breaks for the broken hearted. We are called to sing the waning darkness into light.

We do that by encountering others, paying attention to our neighbours, establishing relationships that are tender, understanding, gentle and humble. To learn from one another, by listening to each others' stories and not being afraid of difference. By being prepared to be vulnerable. We can sing in the strength that rises out of weakness, rather than try to impose authoritative positions on others.

I have said that I have loved coming in here, enjoying the quiet and being able to reflect. I hope that I have not simply stayed rooted still in time and place, but I have also been part of his clouds of witness. Because I have also enjoyed sitting on one of the benches in the sun and talking to random strangers and perhaps seeing life a little bit through their eyes. I guess that many of you may have formed new relationships with strangers in this past year. I hope that as each of us reflects on the marvellous story from Easter to Pentecost and as like the original followers of Jesus, we stand on the threshold of change, we will take courage and look to the Holy Spirit to show us how to respond to the world in 2021.

Amen

Sarah Thomas 13 May 2021