

Sermon 21 May 2020 – Ascension Day

Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:44 to end

‘After Jesus’ suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs.’

We have been celebrating this since Easter.

We have followed those disciples from despair to disbelief, from fear to wonder. We have seen them demand proof of Jesus being more than a ghost – he has eaten with them, has walked with them, has shown them his scars from whipping and crucifixion. In Luke’s account in his gospel, he has continued to teach them and when he left them at Bethany he blessed them.

While Charlotte was reading from Acts, I showed those who could see the screen, a painting from the Methodist Collection of Modern Art. A depiction by Peter Rogers. It shows the central figure of Jesus wrapped in a golden light, almost like a ball of light, which seems to have travelled from the sky. The light becomes translucent in places so we can see Jesus’ head turned upwards and his feet, no longer touching the ground. To his right are a group of people, male and female, looking upwards, but at Jesus’ face rather than the place he is looking towards. And to his left are two figures in white, surrounded by red flames. These flames also look to have travelled from the sky.

So what now might be the emotions of the disciples? Luke’s version in Acts tells us that Jesus has been with them for forty days since the resurrection. Other accounts don’t record a specific time. But they have probably become used to him being around again, to expect him to be with them, even if his appearances aren’t quite as they were when they were on the road with him. And here he is leaving them – again. So much of the stories we tell around Easter are stories of loss, of absence. Lazarus’ death when Martha says to Jesus – if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Of Jesus’ own cry from the cross – “Why have you forsaken me?’ And even the early morning and the empty tomb. Stories of loss and absence. Followed now by Jesus leaving them, leaving them again. They could interpret it as God leaving them, saying, well it was nice while it lasted, but now he’s definitely gone.

In that sense it seems odd that we celebrate Ascension Day at all.

But there’s more to it, more than simply looking forward as we do with blessed hindsight to Pentecost, as prefigured in the painting with those in white robes, standing amongst flames.

He tells them, tells us, they/we have a future. After all, in Luke’s gospel version, he blesses them as he leaves. He tells them that they will receive power, the power of the Holy Spirit. That they will learn to see the world through his eyes. Stand on their own feet, yes, make mistakes, yes, mess up. But always with his light shining to guide us, enlighten us and take us on our voyage of discovery.

Because Jesus has life, so we have life. And if at times things seem unclear, then even though Acts is full of, dare I say, acts, full of action, it starts with Jesus telling his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. When we don’t know which way to turn, Acts encourages us that there is nothing wrong in waiting, waiting to see the next step.

But there we also should heed the words of those figures in white – who exhorted the disciples – why are you standing looking up to heaven? That’s the point when we should heed the words from Luke’s gospel, that we are part of Jesus’ clouds of witnesses. To bring our eyes back down to earth. To look at the places we live in and see them through Jesus’ eyes. To love the world with the same compassion and anger and love that Jesus does.

Jesus didn’t leave this earth when he was lifted up from the disciples’ sight. He is everywhere. And as he challenges us to live without his physical presence so he promises his comfort, his Holy Spirit.

Jesus is now more than a visible friend, he is the centre of life, the source of energy and of trust.

If people say to us – this is a world without God, we don’t simply say, oh, it’s not as bad as all that, we simply work harder to bring that light, energy and trust into the world. We speak, pray, listen and work with love, even when we don’t understand the problems or the solutions.

Just as the disciples are told to stop looking up to heaven, where they will be blinded by the light, we can look at each other and work to repair the world in love and compassion.

We know that Christians are not the only ones who can work with love and compassion, if we didn’t know before we have had plenty of evidence of that in the past 3 months. We know that we also make mistakes and act in our own self interest. We know that at times we hide.

So let’s keep looking for that light, the light of Jesus.

Let us support one another as we engage in this fractured world. In our different emotions and differing responses to that which Jesus draws to our attention

Let us have the courage that Mark has had this week, sharing with us his voyage of discovery with his family as he looks for the dynamic activity of God..

Let us join in as we can with the prayer walk, let us identify 5 people we will pray for between now and Pentecost, let us consider how our experience of this period of lockdown may change the way we live.

We ended Lent and started the Easter season by reading and reflecting on several sonnets by Malclom Guite. I’d like to mark this Ascension Day by sharing his sonnet for this day with you. May it be an encouragement to us, to sing as clouds of witnesses, to let his light shine in us and whilst being witnesses, to also learn to wait.

Ascension Day – Malcolm Guite

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory

Whilst we were rooted still in time and place,

As earth became a part of heaven’s story

And heaven opened to his human face.
We saw him go and yet we were not parted,
He took us with him to the heart of things,
The heart that broke for all the broken hearted
Is whole and heaven centred now, and sings;
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,
Whilst we ourselves have become his clouds of witness
And sing the waning darkness into light;
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,
Which all creation waits to see revealed.