



Ascension: Absence or Presence/ts?

28 May 2017

Revd Jenny Wilkens

Acts 1:6-14

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

Some of you know that I'm not the world's greatest flyer, I do it but it's not my favourite way to travel. However on a good day if the weather's fine and it's all going smoothly with no roller coaster bumps, I have to confess I actually quite enjoy being 30,000 feet up in the air – the nearest I can claim to an Ascension experience of my own! When I'm up in the blue yonder, soaring above the clouds, I sometimes think of one of the first Soviet cosmonauts who, when he arrived back on earth after his brief sojourn in orbit, confirmed to his waiting audience that there was no God in space, "as I didn't see him when I was up there"!

Up there - we struggle these days with the idea that Jesus ascended, went up, even though Luke's account we heard at the beginning of the book of Acts uses the word 'up' 4 times in 3 verses!

We're quick to say well, of course that reflects the worldview of the time, and indeed right through to medieval times, of a 3 tier universe - heaven, then earth, then Sheol or Hades beneath.

We know better, we say, we know all about the atmosphere, space and the immensities of the physical universe around us. It may be of interest to note though that many scientists, many physicists today conceive of the universe in increasingly multi-dimensional ways, ways far too complex for most of us to get a handle on. The truth may still be out there!

I have found it more fruitful recently not to ask 'how' or 'where' questions about the ascension of Jesus, but more the 'why' question. Just why was the ascension necessary?

We often answer this question in terms of the need for Jesus to move beyond the temporal and spatial limits imposed on him in the incarnation. Jesus lived in one place at one time - 1st century CE Palestine. Now that Jesus had shown us what God was like in human form, now that Jesus had shown us the self-giving love of God expressed in his death on the cross, now that Jesus had by the power of God been raised to new resurrection life, now was the time for his presence to be made known to the whole world in a way that was accessible to all, wherever and whenever in history they might live.

But I wonder if Jesus' ascension, his departure from this earth was also necessary to get us moving, to push us towards growth in discipleship and ministry, in following in the footsteps of Christ. Because if he'd still been here, I think the reality of human nature is that we would have left Jesus to it, we would still be watching Jesus teaching and healing and doing miracles.

We would stand there making all the right admiring noises, but saying no, you do it, Jesus, I'm not quite confident enough yet.

It reminds me of my first Vicar when I was a curate, making me take a funeral for a baby despite my protests that I'd never done one before and I'd much rather just 'help' him, but he prevailed, and it was a formative learning experience for me, even with a quavery voice!

It's been suggested that a good sermon illustration for Ascension might be if the minister leading the service got up and walked out in the middle of the service and left the congregation to carry on. I'm not suggesting that happen today, although I think you'd be just fine! But we all know what it is like in a team or workplace or group to be cosily reliant on those who normally lead or play or have a particular role, and then find out at the last minute that they are unavoidably absent. Perhaps then we find that others muck in or tentatively put their hand up, are stretched and challenged, but actually do an 'ok' job, and it's a vital and empowering part of their growth and development.

Perhaps the Ascension then, rather than being a withdrawal of God into heaven leaving us bereft, is actually part of the generosity of God in sharing ministry in this world with us, fallible and fragile as we are. As Teresa of Avila reminds us, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which to look out with Christ's compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good; Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless people now."

That is a bit of an awesome thought, until we remember that St Teresa addresses those words to us not as individuals, but as the body of Christ together. We are Christ to the world together, and with the gifts that Jesus pours out on the church through his Spirit dwelling within us and among us. So all God's people are to be involved in the work of ministry, in Greek *diakonia*, ministry or service.

Part of the role of those of us who are clergy and leaders in the church is to support you in using your gifts in ministry and service, in whatever sphere God calls you to serve in our world.

The New Testament calls this 'equipping the saints' (Eph. 4:12). The Greek word used for 'equip' the saints, is also the word used to describe the fishermen mending their nets in the Gospels (Mt 4:21). So it's ok if we still have a few holes in our lives! It is as we are made whole, and progressively become ever more whole in Christ, that we are used in God's service. We don't have to wait till we're perfect before we start, God mends our net as we go, so that we can be used to fish for people, to share the love of God with those we live and work alongside.

This is how we grow to Christian maturity together, learning alongside each other, trying out in ministry and service, encouraging each other. We follow and serve one who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. We follow and serve one who poured out love and his own life unstintingly. We follow and serve one who takes the risk of giving us gifts, and trusts that we will use them well and for the service of others. What we choose to give freely and generously cannot be taken away from us. This is the outlook, the way of life that we follow, modelled for us by the ascended Christ.

I find the words of our reading from 1 Peter today very poignant as we reflect on the loss of so many young lives in Manchester and then among the Coptic Christian community in Egypt: 'you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering' (1 Peter 5:9). May we be heartfelt in our prayers for these our Christian brothers and sisters, and especially in this week ahead, the week of prayer for Christian unity. May we also be in prayer for our brothers and sisters in the Muslim community as the season of Ramadan has now begun; for those who may feel vulnerable or unsafe where they are lumped together with radicals, labelled or misunderstood, and for people of goodwill of all religions to work together to build trust and community, and to work for peace and justice for all.

Our Gospel reading today allowed us to 'eavesdrop' if you will on Jesus praying to his Father, praying for his disciples and for those who would be his disciples in the future, and yet praying, we recall, when he was facing his own suffering and death. Jesus' focus though in John's gospel is on the glory of the cross, not a glorification of suffering per se, but the revelation of God's love outpoured, God's love shown in Christ which draws those who respond to it into knowledge of God and relationship within the community of God's love. As we pray for our church and world today, may we join with the prayer of Christ, "Holy Father, protect them in your name...that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11). Amen.