

Ascension Day: Thursday 21 May 2020 – a sermon by Richard Shreeve

Today is Ascension Day and Acts 1:1-11 is a story of transition. It is the transition of a loved one taking his leave. It is a transition from the leadership of Jesus to the leadership of Spirit-led apostles. It is the transition from a movement to an organization. It is the transition, to the beginning of the church.

In today's reading from Acts, the disciples were focused on Jesus, they want to know if this is the time. They are like children on a car journey wanting to know if they are 'nearly there'! They believed that God had called Jesus to be the true King of Israel and that they had been called as disciples to be part of this renewal movement. Jesus had confused them, they had not expected him to die such a violent death and now he was back from the dead, was he now about to renew the kingdom?

Jesus does not tell them that Israel will not be restored. Instead, he tells them that the "times or seasons" are God's business—not theirs. As the keepers of classified documents would say today, "You have no need to know." Jesus doesn't want the apostles to be distracted by "times or seasons" when they have more urgent business to take care of. He wants to redirect their attention from things that they don't need to know to things that they do need to do.

"But you will receive power (*dunamis* – the word from which we get our word dynamite) when the Holy Spirit has come upon you". The apostles had asked about the restoration of Israel's political power. Jesus tells them that they will receive a different kind of power, God's power, conveyed to them by the Holy Spirit. God's spirit at work in the world and in their lives. It was this same Holy Spirit that Jesus received at his baptism and it was this same Holy Spirit that empowered his earthly ministry. Now this Holy Spirit will empower his apostles at Pentecost (and billions of believers after Pentecost) to accomplish what Jesus wants them to do to bear witness to him **"in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."**

Then we come to the climatic part of this particular story – Jesus' ascension to Heaven, to return to sit at the right hand of His Father. Jesus was literally lifted up and taken out of the sight of the disciples. Although his body had been changed Jesus ascended in human form. The cloud denotes the awesome presence of God.

Jesus has told the disciples to "stay here" in the city until they have been clothed with power. In other words, wait there, don't go anywhere. Why not? I am sure they were probably itching to get going. Desperate to go and tell people about all that had been going on and especially once they had seen Jesus ascend into Heaven, surely they would want to share the news.

Jesus was not making them wait for fun. Firstly, I think it was a way of helping them to have self-discipline. In the same way as we put a treat in front of a dog and then repeatedly say "wait" and make sure they do, before we then let them go and devour the treat. We do not always get instant gratification. We cannot have everything straight away.

Secondly, Jesus did not want them to rush off as then they would be doing it in their own strength, perhaps pursuing their own agenda and forgetting what their true mission and purpose was. They have to wait for the Holy Spirit, for the presence of God to be in them and with them, only then will they be able to achieve their mission.

At the moment we are in lock-down and like many of us I would love to be able see our children and grandchildren. The pandemic is still infecting people, and people are still dying from this terrible virus. To end social distancing would be foolish to say the least. We have to be patient, but we do not have to sit about doing nothing. We have to be prepared for when the pandemic is over. People are suddenly realising they cannot get through this on their own. Volunteers in their thousands have come forward to help the NHS. Younger people are helping the most vulnerable with shopping and fetching much needed prescriptions. The Queen told us in her broadcast to us “the streets are not empty they are filled with love”. I believe this love will translate to more people attending church when the time comes. Just like the disciples we need to pray for guidance and for the Holy Spirit to lead us so we, like those first disciples, shall be ready for whatever God wants of us.

You would expect the disciples to be despondent at Jesus leaving them. But we don't actually get the feeling that the disciples were particularly despondent! In fact in Luke's Gospel, chapter 24 ends with these verses (V 51-53) “While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” Acts 1:14 tells us that they were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.”

The disciples are not just going to sit and do nothing whilst they wait. They are going to be productive in that time, they are going to keep busy. Not with mindless things and time-wasting activities, but with worship and prayer. They were people of purpose. People who knew their calling, who knew what they were to do, who knew that God had a task for them – and would equip them to fulfil it. The most purposeful we could do now involve prayer, worship, and praise.

That is why they weren't torn by this parting: Jesus was leaving, but he was staying – the Spirit would bring that sense of Christ into every moment, just as he had said it would. And so they waited. Perhaps, if they were anything like me, the waiting was the hardest part. Perhaps not, after all, they were in the temple continually blessing God. They allowed this promise to sink into their hearts, and they waited. And we know the end of their waiting, we will celebrate it on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit was poured out, not just given, but lavishly shared with signs and wonders, making everything the Apostles and the early Church was to accomplish possible.

In the work of “the Spirit of Jesus”, (16:7) we encounter Jesus and what he continues to do. We aren't left staring at where Jesus used to be (whether in history, or in our own life experiences, or in our supposedly settled opinions and interpretations). Although, Jesus ascended into heaven we continue to encounter Jesus through the preaching of the Word and the Sacraments, through the fellowship of the church, and through ministry with the poor and the oppressed. And because Jesus has ascended as our risen Lord, none of the other departures we experience (departures of relationships, of health, or of life itself) can harm us or rob us of God's good promise. For that, we can and should celebrate The Ascension with praise and thanks.

Finally, we to find ourselves in a period of transition moving from what was “Normal to the New Normal” as the government slowly relaxes the lockdown rules. Like the disciples we face big changes in our lifestyle. Changes to the way we shop and socialize and the extra time it takes to do even a simple shop. Where you can and cannot go on holiday. Changes to how we meet at church, and the way we worship. How we receive the Holy Sacraments and many more changes. The disciples could not have imagined the changes Pentecost would bring about to their lives but while they waited, they prayed and worshipped God and we must do the same.