

Luke 24:44-end, Acts 1:4-11, Ascension Day

Our readings today are actually two parts of one narrative. The Acts reading, also written by Luke, picks up the story where our gospel ends.

And the hinge between the two books is what we think about today – Ascension Day. The Ascension of Jesus.

Our archbishops ask us to commit to especially pray during the days between Ascension Day - today - and Pentecost which is a week on Sunday. This prayer initiative is named Thy Kingdom Come and is a global prayer movement that invites Christians around the world to pray for more people to come to know Jesus. What started in 2016 as an invitation from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to the Church of England has grown into an international and ecumenical call to prayer. Urging us to pray that our world and individuals in it will be transformed and that God's kingdom would be seen and experienced on earth. And my goodness how it is needed. A kingdom that the bible tells us is about love and peace and reconciliation, a kingdom of forgiveness and grace and justice. And so let's commit to praying, intentionally each day from now until Pentecost for transformation. There is a 'thy kingdom come' website if you want to know more.

Thy Kingdom Come – we pray it every time we pray the Lord's prayer and it is really appropriate as we think about the ascension of Jesus. Ascension is an often overlooked festival in the life of the church we skip from Holy Week and Easter to Pentecost but actually these don't make sense unless we pause to reflect on the Ascension.

What is the ascension about – Jesus disappearing into the clouds? Well yes, but not simply going away. And leaving the disciples alone. That would not be worth celebrating, it would simply be a painful rerun of Good Friday when they thought they had lost him.

Ascension Day was a key time for the disciples, for the church, as Jesus leaves the disciples, not because it is the end but because it is the beginning of a new chapter.

Ascension is the handing over of the baton from Jesus, to his disciples, the early church. He had been physically present in a very small area of the world, for a relatively short time with a largely, although not exclusively, Jewish following. And now Jesus makes it clear that this is not all there is. Verse 8, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. It was his final commission before he left them. It's not a new work, but a handing on. It would be easy for the disciples to mourn again the loss of Jesus – how can his work continue if he is gone? William Temple, one of our Archbishops said *'The ascension of Christ is his liberation from all restrictions of time and space. It does not represent his removal from the earth, but his constant presence everywhere on earth.'*

He went telling them they were to wait for the promise of God, the power of the Spirit, that they might be his witnesses and continue his work, his work to bring the kingdom of God to here and now. Thy Kingdom come. We pray but we also do, we become part of the answer to our prayer that God's kingdom will come. Pope Francis said *'you pray for the hungry then you feed them, that is how prayer works.'*

And that is what the ascension is about. We, the body of Christ, take on the ministry and actions of Christ in order that the world may see him and know him, their saviour and redeemer.

Dr John Foster told the story of a Hindu man coming to speak to an Indian Bishop. Quite unaided he had read the New Testament. The story had fascinated him and Christ had laid his spell upon him, then he read on and became more excited. In the gospels it was Jesus, his

works and his suffering. In Acts...what the disciples did and thought and taught had taken the place that Christ had occupied. The church continued where Christ had left off. *'Therefore', said this man, 'I must belong to the church that carries on the life of Christ.'*

He got it, he understood that the role of the Christian follower is to live the life of Jesus. Are you up for it? Are you willing to take the risk, hear the call and follow in his footsteps?

To be the ones to speak what Jesus spoke, to do what Jesus did, to be what Jesus was and to do his work. And we, two thousand years later continue that story, continue that ministry of being his witnesses.

The disciples of Jesus went on a journey with him, and at different times, in different ways, they had to change, they had to respond to the movements of Jesus. Take Peter, from fisherman, to impulsive, devoted disciple, to frightened denier, to restored apostle, to dynamic preacher and evangelist, to martyr.

The disciples engaged in a roller coaster of a journey with Jesus, a time of constant change and movement. Three years of close time with him, to the low of Good Friday when he was taken from them, to Easter Sunday when he came back to them and stayed with them for a while, to Ascension when it must have felt that he was leaving them again, but then they see, he is with them always as the Spirit arrives and equips them for the work and ministry of the Kingdom of God.

So what for us? Well that baton handed to the first disciples by Jesus has been passed through the ages, through the centuries, across the church and the world as people have responded not just to the challenge to follow Jesus but to be part of his body here on earth.

Each of us have a part to play. Despite what people think, the church is constantly changing, on a local level, new vicars, vacancies, births,

deaths, newly emerging ministries and projects. These kinds of periods of change, just as at the ascension, are great times to ponder afresh what God is saying to us, how are we the people of God going to get on with the work of God, how are we going to go about bringing his kingdom here, now and allowing people to meet Jesus? How must I, how must we, just like that Hindu man who encountered Jesus and the church of the new testament, how can we belong to the church that carries on the life of Christ?

Remember those famous words of Teresa of Avila

'Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.'

So today, lets join in a global movement of Prayer for thy kingdom come, but lets also ask God and other Christians, what can I do, who can I be to make it happen, how can we be agents of the kingdom of God here on earth?

Almighty God, your ascended Son has sent us into the world to preach the good news of your kingdom: inspire us with your Spirit and fill our hearts with the fire of your love, that all who hear your Word may be drawn to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen