

Sermon: 16 May 2021; Easter 7; Ascension Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26; 1 Jn 5:9-13; John 17: 6-19

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable unto You, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What event for you was the climax and completion of Jesus' life and ministry? Some of you might agree with the author of St John's gospel in that it was His crucifixion ... *It is finished!* (Jn 19: 30). Others might agree with St Paul and the authors of the other gospels that it was His resurrection, or that the crucifixion and the resurrection go together ... you know *both and* ... (in which case maybe they're Anglicans?). If either of these is the case, where does the Ascension fit in? Such questions are the stuff of mighty disagreements among those better educated than me!

So, what does *the Ascension* mean to us in this post Christendom, post Christian world? Well, perhaps it fits in nicely with part of Hugh's sermon last week? If we go about our working days *vaguely aware* of Jesus ... remembering Him from time to time; remembering what He calls us to do and be sometimes; perhaps we might be better described as having *an idea* of Jesus, *a memory* of our baptism or of the Vicar's sermon last week and how it might change our lives at some point in the future ... if only we could really remember it. If this is the case, when we come to Holy Communion the sacramental ritual might be just something we do to remind ourselves of who we are and Whose we are. We might also frame our ministry in terms of how much of our effort we can afford to spend on the Great Commission ... going out into the world and making disciples ... loving others as Jesus loves us. But is this all that Jesus calls us to and wants for us?

Today's gospel is part of the last prayer Jesus shares with His disciples at the table in the Upper Room, before they go together, down to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus will be betrayed and arrested. Jesus is asking His Father to protect His disciples as

they go about their work, living in the world. Not setting themselves apart ... living faithful but isolated lives, but *in the world* ... among the godless and the unholy ... *the last the least and the lost* ... as beacons of light and life, and as followers of The Way to the Father. We can be examples of not only how to live, but how to *thrive* and *find joy!*

Travel agents these days are experts at pitching a cruise or an overseas holiday as time away, to restore and rejuvenate ... but if you've ever been away like that the real difficulty comes when you get back ... and try to reinsert yourself into the grind of day to day work. You might feel as though all you want to do is go away again. Time out isn't bad ... indeed it's necessary ... even Jesus had to escape from time to time ... to rest, to restore His balance and to pray ... so, we should expect to do the same. But we need to seek balance at every stage in our lives, leaving time for God's work *as well as* enough rest and recuperation. Permanently escaping from the stress and pressure of the world isn't the answer.

While Paul and all the gospel writers might disagree about where Jesus' work culminates, they do agree about where ours begins! John spends a lot of time revealing the work of the Holy Spirit and how we need to listen carefully so as to distinguish God's work from other options. They all agree that the Holy Spirit guides and empowers all our work in God's name. It makes sense then that Ascension, the point at which Jesus actually leaves His disciples to be with His Father, is a crux, a culminating point when Jesus, having finally proved that what He was saying all along was true, now returns to the right hand of God in order to get ready for His next assignment. He leaves us confident that the Holy Spirit ... our Advocate and guide ... will lead us, assuming

that we are receptive to that guidance. In His gospel message today, Jesus prays for us, for our success and our attentiveness, as well as for protection from the evil one. He leaves us confident that we have all we need to get on with God's work in the world; knowing that we have at last received all that He has been given on our behalf and confident that we know what we have to do.

In another sense though, He leaves us knowing that the choice is still ours. The Holy Spirit is a reminder that our holiness and eternal life are just a phone call away ... well, perhaps not so much a phone call as *a prayer call*. We still need to step out on our own ... eyes and ears and heart open, to receive the guidance from the Holy Spirit, to discover and discern and act, in order that we can achieve everything that God would have us do and be.

The other readings today identify similar themes of seeking an answer to prayer, and of submitting to God's will. Acts 1 tells us about how Matthias was chosen to replace Judas as one of the twelve after Jesus' death, and 1 John 5 reminds us that whoever has the Son has life and joy! If you were looking for examples of how prayer leads us to find joy and thrive in God's service, then these are good verses to start with.

In the words of the Psalm for today:

Blessed are those who do not follow the counsel of the wicked or linger in the ways of sinners ... but their delight is in the law of the Lord: and on that law they will meditate day and night. They are like trees planted beside a watercourse which yield their fruit in due season. Their leaves do not wither and ... whatever they do it shall prosper ... For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked is doomed.

Ps 1 (adapted)

Amen.