



Sermon preached by Dr Augur Pearce on 29th May 2022

Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Luke 21:25-33; Ephesians 1:15-23

The in-between time

Why does the feast of the Ascension fall when it does? We are celebrating it today because its actual date is always a Thursday; and although there was a lunchtime service here three days ago, a Thursday which is not a bank holiday isn't always the easiest day for people to get to church.

Why, then, such an inconvenient day? Whether we take it literally or metaphorically, the Ascension story makes a number of important points and in churches that follow any sort of annual calendar, is earned its place there alongside the Epiphany or the Transfiguration. Wouldn't it always have made more sense to commemorate it on a Sunday, as many churches now do?

The answer lies in the passage Ian read from the Acts of the Apostles; whose author Luke tells his friend Theophilus that after Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to the Apostles *over a period of forty days* and taught them about the Kingdom of God.

That in-between time, forty days between Easter and the Ascension, is unique to Luke's account in Acts. John's Gospel has no Ascension story at all, whilst passages in Matthew and Mark read as though Jesus made one or two appearances, ascending to heaven straight away at the last of these. Even Luke himself seems to tell a different story: Jesus appears to the women at the tomb, 'the same day' he joins the disciples on the road to Emmaus, those disciples run back to Jerusalem to tell the rest, and Jesus appears again in their midst – still, therefore, on Easter Sunday. He leads them out to Bethany and ascends from there; whereas, in Acts, the take-off point is the Mount of Olives.

Thus only Luke's later and more detailed narrative places Jesus' departure at the end of a substantial period of time – time devoted to final instruction of the disciples about the Kingdom. Forty days of preparation for the new community's mission, mirroring the forty days of Jesus' own wilderness preparation for his ministry. But also forty days of relative normality. In other words, only this story gives us a serious feeling of time *between* the days of the Cross and empty tomb, and those of the end-time (since Christians in the time when the New Testament writings were put together expected Jesus's return and the final Judgment to follow soon after he left them). Those forty days were a time when the Lord's earthly ministry was already finished, but when believers' focus had not yet shifted to the end.

In a sense we are still in that in-between time today. We know things have been said about the last days. Jesus spoke, as we heard in the Gospel reading, of the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory; the angels on the Mount of Olives confirmed this, assuring the Eleven that Jesus would return as they had seen him go. Paul reminded the Ephesians of their hope of a glorious inheritance to come. But we have a different world-view from that of the first century: we have taken to heart Jesus' warning that it is not for us to know the divine timetable. We do not expect these events, in the modern expression, 'any time soon'. We cannot, therefore, focus solely on a glorious – or even a fearful - future.

Nor can we live just in the past. We know Jesus is no longer travelling around Galilee or Judaea. 'No longer', as Brian Wren's hymn puts it, 'bound to distant years in Palestine'. Certainly, I believe history is of vital importance: not just fascinating, but essential to a full understanding

of the present. We cannot grasp fully the terrible things still happening in Ukraine without knowing how Russia came into existence with its early capital in Kyiv. We cannot see the importance of visible equality without appreciating how stark and unfair the differences in treatment of fellow-human beings were, centuries or even decades ago. We cannot even join intelligently in the coming Jubilee celebrations of our monarchy without remembering it was once under threat. (And if you're wondering about the front cover of your Order of Service, today is Oak Apple Day – the anniversary of the landing of King Charles II at his Restoration.) But for all its importance, history becomes academic – in the worst sense of that word – if it becomes our sole concern. Lessons must be drawn from what we know of the past – and those lessons are not just for the distant future, but also for the present.

I have heard it said that different parts of the Christian family are good at different aspects of this. The Orthodox, for example, have the strongest focus on the supernatural aspects of the Christian faith – their worship unchanged for centuries, designed to offer the worshipper a foretaste of heaven. They are a church of the past and the future, with few concessions to the present. The modern United Reformed Church, by contrast, relates best to the present, and not so fussed about the claims of past miracles or future Judgment. Personally, I think this may be polarising a bit too much. There are Orthodox clergy and Orthodox faithful who wrestle with current issues and – as we know only too well – serve in current conflicts. Equally there are members, elders and ministers of the URC who see their discipleship, their mission and their hope firmly rooted in God's historic activity.

In fact, whereas Luke's forty days remind us that we live in the world of today, with our feet on the ground and still learning about the Kingdom whilst – to quote another hymn – the splendour of light hides the immortal and invisible God – the Ascension at the end of those forty days calls us to think also precisely about things which are veiled from our sight. In our 'Sharing Together' slot I spoke about what it means that Jesus the Man has entered the heavenly realms; but what happened within or beyond the cloud can only be, for us, a matter of faith. We cannot see – even the Apostles could not see – Jesus' enthronement at the Father's right hand. It is only by reflecting on what we know of God from other sources, and by logically extrapolating our conviction that Jesus lives, that he came from God in a very unique way and that his way of love and service was vindicated despite all human envy and resentment could do to him, that we conclude God has 'seated him in the heavenly places, far above all rule and power and dominion', and draw out the implications for ourselves.

To sum up, then, I am suggesting we must continue balancing our focus on current realities, on the needs of our neighbours, on our duties as citizens, on the state of the planet, on where people stand today, with continuing study and reflection on where we come from, on the stories of God's past working in the world – whether those be historical or conveying truths in picture form – and also with an eye on the 'continuing city' to which we journey. *Why* we love and serve our neighbour is as important as how we do it. May this season of the Ascension help us to focus on that balance.

Amen.