

**Theme: The Ascension of Jesus - The Promise**

**Preached by Murray Wills, 29 May 2022**

**St James' Church 8am and 10am Services**

**Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53**

May the words on my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, my rock and redeemer AMEN.

Today we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus.

Let's remind ourselves of where we are at in the Easter Story. We have journeyed with Jesus to Crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

Jesus has also appeared to a couple of disciples on the road to Emmaus while they try to work out what happened. They had hoped that Jesus was the prophet to come, the Messiah and hope for Israel. Jesus reveals himself to them and explained things about himself.

Jesus had appeared for 40 days after the resurrection, at unexpected times and places. Just like the way God often shows up for us now, at unexpected times and places.

[Today on Ascension Day, Jesus reveals himself for the last time in Emmaus where he ate with the Disciples. As we hear in the Gospel today He reminds them about what the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms taught: that the Messiah would suffer and be raised, and that repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be taught to all nations, starting from Jerusalem. He

reminds them because they witnessed what happened, and they can assure others of what happened.

Ascension Day was actually celebrated on Thursday, and some of you may have celebrated it (especially if you came to prayers here during the day). We had a choice about whether to celebrate and talk about it this Sunday. In my view it is crucial to our understanding of what Jesus called us to do and be and I am glad we keep the tradition of talking about it today and hearing the scripture that relates to it.

It can pass us by in this country, but in places where the Eastern Church is prevalent it's an important feast day, up there in importance with Christmas and Pentecost. In many places, it's a holiday including for instance in France.

In many parts of Greece where the Orthodox observe the day with great joy, village people stay up on the night of Ascension staring at the skies. Legend tells us that those "who are pure in heart" see a light ascending to the heavens.

Looking at the skies, reminds us of the unquenchable longing of the early Christians for the Lord's return.

Luke is the only one of the evangelists who gives a particular image to this event, starting with the end of his gospel and continuing it in the Acts reading we read today. Fascinated by his words, countless great artists and iconographers have painted their interpretation of Jesus' Ascension. In these paintings, icons, and frescoes, Jesus is literally ascending, his feet no longer touching the earth, sometimes surrounded by

angels, a cloud above ready to hide him from human eyes. This is the image that many of us probably have of the Ascension.

There is nothing specifically right or wrong in this image. We are visual thinkers. Words help us create images that we remember even though we have seen them only in art or in our own minds.

At Evensong in May last year, I talked specifically about this 16<sup>th</sup> century painting by Dosso Dossi, and having discovered that virtually nothing has been written on this particular painting, though it is similar in style to many others.

Notice that it is divided into two planes: The earthly world below, which Jesus is leaving and a celestial one.

In this case the Virgin Mary is depicted in the middle of the picture (you can just see her in the back). Sometimes, but not in this painting, Jesus is surrounded by a mandorla, an almond shaped frame used to depict a halo, and Mary is in the middle almost touching it, signifying her holiness and connection to Jesus. Often Paul too is depicted below with a sword looking upward towards Jesus. In this case it is possible that the man with stretched out hands is Paul (can anyone think of an issue with that).

Paul was not present at the Ascension; in fact, he didn't convert to Christianity until after Christ ascended. The sword or upstretched arms are a symbol depicting that he was not there at the time. The people depicted below represent the Church.

In the Heavenly realm we see cerebrum and possibly seraphim rejoicing, at least one with a musical instrument (no angels in

this one, but this was a feature prior to the renaissance). The main role of both the cherubim and seraphim is to sit at the throne and worship God. We also see Christ Triumphant holding a resurrection banner. The blessing gesture by Christ with his right hand signifies that he is blessing the entire church (you and I). In Luke 24 verse 51 it states "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven".

We could debate in what form Jesus returned to the Father and some hints are given throughout the stories of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances: He enters a room suddenly, without using a door; he appears next to couple walking together on the road to Emmaus; he cooks breakfast for Peter and his friends by the shore. But he disappears just as suddenly as he appears. So, the hints tell us that though the resurrected body is visible, the qualities it demonstrates are different from the body that was crucified.

Two details are surprising in this final story in Luke's gospel. One is found in verse 45:

"Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures."

There is something liberating in this statement. Our minds must be open to understand, not closed. We see so much evidence today of minds that refuse to understand the truth of the scriptures, preferring to stay closed and limited by what they think they understand. Reading the Bible with open minds, open because Christ has done the opening, reveals something new each time we read a passage.

They worshiped him, and after returning to Jerusalem with great joy as instructed, they waited until the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit, which would rest upon and live inside each believer.

The Good News of God's love was never meant to be hidden, it was meant to be shared generously with others. In fact, we are instructed by Christ to do so, just as those eyewitnesses to Christ's life, death and resurrection were. God's love is for everyone, everywhere, no exceptions. We are called to be evangelists, sharing the news of the Risen Christ, in words but also in deeds.

With Christ's Ascension and by the power of the Holy Spirit working within each believer, the opportunity arises for the spread of the Gospel to a much wider group than those who would come into contact with a small group of Disciples. The Ascended Christ has entrusted us, you and me, to give witness to the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit working within us, offering new hope and new possibilities for those we come into contact with. Yep, we are it – we are expected to do this.

Nine days must pass until the Day of Pentecost comes, when we commemorate the gift of power from on high. This nine-day period is called Ascension Season, the conclusion of the Great Fifty Days of Easter and a season within a season. This time of waiting and praying reminds us as disciples of Jesus, of the role of prayer and waiting in our lives in a culture that is action-orientated and impatient.

In Acts Luke goes on to tell the story of the Christian church. The beautiful truth is that there is an immortality of presence and power. Jesus is still alive and still active. He is not just the one who *was*; he is the one who *is*. The book of Acts tells of the Church that carries on the life of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus's ascension does not mark the *cessation* but the *continuation* of his work as Lord and Messiah. That's what Luke's second book is all about, the "Acts of the risen Lord Jesus," which He works from heaven, through his people, by the Holy Spirit, for the accomplishment of God's purposes.

So, we are called, just as the first disciples were to be disciples of Christ. To be witnesses.

In the words of the Gospel, to "preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations" in this broken world now in our time at our place, in our country, on earth. This is an agenda that can change the world.

During this time between Ascension and Pentecost we are encouraged to enter into something called Thy Kingdom Come. You will find more information about it in your Newslink.

[Video]

What I would like you to do is to write down the names of 5 people that you would like to come to know Jesus that you will regularly pray for up until Pentecost. Let's watch this very short video introduced by the Archbishop of Canterbury explaining what it's all about.

I would like to finish with a wonderful Ascension Day Sonnet which I used in an Evensong last year by Malcolm Guite.

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory  
Whilst we were rooted still in time and place  
As earth became a part of Heaven's story  
And heaven opened to his human face.  
We saw him go and yet we were not parted  
He took us with him to the heart of things  
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted  
Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,  
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,  
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,  
Whilst we ourselves become his clouds of witness  
And sing the waning darkness into light,  
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,  
Which all creation waits to see revealed .

Amen



**Sentence:** Lift up your heads you gates! Lift yourselves up you everlasting doors! that the King of Glory may come in. *Psalms 24:7*

**Collect:** Eternal God, you have given your Son authority in heaven and on earth; grant that we may never lose the vision of his kingdom, but serve him with hope and joy in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Luke 24:36-53 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

<sup>36</sup> While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

<sup>37</sup> They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. <sup>38</sup> He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? <sup>39</sup> Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

<sup>40</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. <sup>41</sup> And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate it in their presence.

<sup>44</sup> He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. <sup>46</sup> He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are

witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

The Ascension of Jesus

<sup>50</sup> When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. <sup>53</sup> And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Acts 1:1-11 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Taken Up Into Heaven

<sup>1</sup> In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup> For John baptized with<sup>[a]</sup> water, but in a few days you will be baptized with<sup>[b]</sup> the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>6</sup>Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

<sup>7</sup>He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

<sup>9</sup>After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

<sup>10</sup>They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup>“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”