

Ascension Day

A sermon by Rev Jane Kraft, given at St. Michaels Sandhurst on 5th May 2016

Readings: Acts 1 v 1-11 Luke 24 v 44 - end

Why do you stand looking upward towards heaven?

Good question!

As I sat in a traffic jam on the M25 the other day, I reflected on an anecdote about the chairman of Mercedes-Benz who in 1900 said that as far as the manufacture of cars was concerned the market would be saturated when it reached one million because by then the total supply of chauffeurs would be exhausted. A year earlier in 1899 the chairman of the patent office said that there would be no further new discoveries because every thing had been discovered. Both these men could not see beyond their present experience. They would have both been dumbfounded if they had lived to see the revolutionary change brought about by the computer age, with E-mails, and Internet and iphones. Cars with satellite navigation, and climatic control, not to mention the traffic jams on the M25. We talk with ease to Australia and important documents are emailed and arrive in an instant and a man in a space station has regular conversations with his family on earth.

Life does not stand still it moves forward and we must move with it.

But that's hard when things beyond our control change around us and sometime we are left standing staring into the void not knowing what to do next.

In John's gospel narrative Jesus had told his disciples "It is to you advantage that I go away"¹

by leaving them and going to the father his presence would not be diminished but enhanced.

But they were still puzzled. How they were going to live in a world without Jesus and how could it be better without Him around.

Today is the Feast of the Ascension, when we remember the moment Jesus ascended back to the glory which was his before the world began.

The Ascension is essential

For Jesus made it clear that his departure would not leave his disciples bereft but would lead them to a new form of his presence among them.

For some time, Jesus had been telling his disciples that he was going away. They had experienced the grief and devastation of parting from Him in death at his crucifixion and they had delight with joyous elation in the reunion at His resurrection appearances but now gently but inexorably he withdrew from their sight and all they seemed to be left with was a promise of his return at some unexpected time in the future.

Most of us if we are honest, don't like change. We are far more comfortable with the known and familiar.

The disciples had known an intimate relationship with Jesus and yet they still hadn't quite grasped the reality that He would leave them and return to the father. BUT they thought maybe this is the moment when the Kingdom is going to be restored to Israel, so they ask him the direct question "is this the time?". His reply directs them to the future and their task in bringing in His Kingdom.

Since the beginning of the churches year on Advent Sunday we have prepared for and celebrated Jesus' birth as a helpless baby in Bethlehem. We have followed the accounts of his baptism in the Jordan and temptations in the wilderness. We have encountered his vulnerability as he slept in the stern of a boat

¹ John 16 v 7

during a raging storm and wept at the grave of a friend. We have journeyed with him through the events of Holy Week and the pain and horror of the crucifixion. And with the disciples have rejoiced at his resurrection as they recognised their Master in his unfolding of the scriptures and the breaking of bread. In all of this we have encountered and experienced the human Jesus.

but we have also had epiphany moments those glimpses of who Jesus really is and his mission to the world. Emmanuel God with us.

Luke gives us a little summery in his opening paragraph to Theophilus and tells him of Jesus Promise. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you: and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Power to continue Christ's mission and spread the good news to all the world.

Yet there they were, those 11 disciples, stood, just gazing at the spot where they had last seen Jesus.

But not for long, encouraged by the men in white the disciples stopped standing rooted to the spot and returned to Jerusalem where they worshiped and prayed together with other followers of Jesus for the next 10 days until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

According to the Statistical Table on Global Mission published in the Bulletin of Missionary Research, a few years after the turn of the millennium it said that - in 1900 (at about the same time when the chairman of Mercedes Benz made his statement about the invention of the car) there were 558 million Christians in the world, a century later they calculated the number has increased to 2 billion.

So much for a church in decline!

Exciting good news needs to be shared.

Things don't get done if we just stand around gazing into the distance. Neither are we able to move on if we cling to the past or the comfort of the familiar. If we are to grow as Christians, if the church is to increase and if the Good News of the love of God's redemption is to spread and His Kingdom come then we need to do a number of things.

The first is to pray, the second is to live the love of God and bring it to the people around us. The Archbishops of York and Canterbury have initiated a call to prayer in the week leading up to Pentecost (May 8th -15th 2016) they long to see a great wave of prayer across our land, throughout the Church of England and many other Churches. John told us about this in his sermon on Sunday. At the heart of our prayers will be the words that Jesus Christ himself taught us - "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" Archbishop Justin says this,

"Our hope is for all Christians to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ, for all of us to have confidence to share the Gospel, for all to respond to the call of Jesus Christ to follow Him as disciples, to live out the Gospel and to seek God's Kingdom from day to day.

*Evangelism is the work of God, and it begins as we seek him in prayer. It is always good for the Church to pray."*²

By virtue of our Baptism we are all called to ministry, for a few of us it is the very particular ministry of Holy Orders for some it is as Church Wardens or servers, or choir members, some are called to a specific ministry of prayer, for many it is to bring the love of Christ to friends and neighbours but what ever we are called to do and be, in Christ's name, we all need to acknowledge that we can't do it without the help, guidance, and support of the Holy Spirit. Each time we say the Lord's Prayer we ask that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. This will only happen when we allow the Spirit to work in us and through us.

Why do you stand looking upward towards heaven?

Good question!

We can't stop still because things change, we must move on.

² Archbishops letter Easter 2016

The bad news is that it may well involve us in coming out of our comfort zone.

The good news is the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, is with us each step of the way, enabling, empowering, and sustaining.

We pray your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven

St. Teresa of Avila said

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours,

no hands but yours,

no feet but yours,

yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion

is to look out to the earth,

yours are the feet by which He is to go about doing good

and yours are the hands by which He is to bless us now.”

So it's up to us!