

Ascension

Acts 1:6-14, John 17:1-11

This week the church celebrated Ascension Day, the day when Jesus was taken up into heaven, an event which marked the end of his ministry here on earth and undoubtedly the least celebrated of the great festivals of the church at least here in Britain although it is the cause of great celebration across much of Europe (even including predominantly Protestant countries like the Netherlands) and Latin America.

At college, there would always be a lunchtime service on the roof of the college chapel tower complete with choir which would cause endless confusion as people stopped to look up and see what was going on but otherwise, the Feast of the Ascension passes by and large unmarked.

Compared to the other great events of the Jesus' life here on earth – his birth, his ministry here on earth, the crucifixion and the resurrection, we know very little about the events of the ascension - Luke tells us in the passage we read from Acts that Jesus was taken up into heaven and a cloud hid him from their sight. Although travelling up through the clouds is very common place now thanks to the miracle of powered flight it is still requires us to be strapped into a thin metal tube attached to a large amount of fuel which we then set fire to in a controlled manner but that wasn't to come for another almost 2000 years! Exactly how Jesus was taken up into heaven we can only speculate about and we don't have much to go on by way of precedent either for examples of people just being taken up into heaven without first passing through death are few and far between.

As we read through the Bible, we find just two other people who this happened to – the first was Enoch back in the Book of Genesis and the second was Elijah. Elijah was taken up into heaven very dramatically in the chariot of fire but Enoch as we read in the Authorised version went for a walk with God and Enoch was not – so, beware who you choose as your walking partner!

So, what can we learn from the events of the Ascension?

The Ascension brings to a close the Incarnation, of Immanuel, of God with us in the physical sense of the fully divine and yet fully human Jesus who walked this earth for a period of about 33 years just over 2000 years ago.

The story of the incarnation begins at Christmas when we celebrate the birth of the Christ child and the coming of Immanuel as the gospels recount the wonderful story of God made man, how his birth fulfilled promises made hundreds of years previously, how his birth was proclaimed by angels and how shepherds and wise men came to worship him.

Apart from one very brief glimpse when Jesus was about 12 and went up to Jerusalem with his parents, we know nothing of Jesus' life until he began his earthly ministry at the age of about 30. During the next 3 years or so Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah and how he would make the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, the mute speak as well as preaching and teaching with a power and authority never seen before.

As the gospel accounts unfold, they mark a change in emphasis from making the gospel known to Jesus' focus on the journey to Jerusalem where he knew he would face death on the cross yet despite the horror that awaited him, he would not be deflected from his mission.

The passage we have just read from John's gospel is taken from Jesus' final recorded prayer for himself and for his disciples immediately before he is betrayed and arrested.

Jesus begins by praying for himself, that he should be glorified in order that he might glorify his Father before going on to describe eternal life – that they (that's the disciples and through the course of the years, us) may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

So in these verses, Jesus tells us what eternal life is – that we should know the only true God and Jesus Christ who was sent by the Father and this is absolutely central to our faith for despite what those around us might tell us, there is only one way to eternal life and that is through knowing God through Jesus Christ. In the post modern world that we live in, there is a view that whatever religion you follow, it will lead eventually to God but that is not and cannot be true for of the leaders of the faiths great and small across the world, only Jesus died to pay the price for our sin, only Jesus rose again from the dead to demonstrate his victory over death and only Jesus has ascended to heaven where he reigns at the side of the Father so the Ascension is another example of the uniqueness of Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Having prayed for himself, Jesus turns to pray for the disciples and buried within this prayer is one of the few references that we have to the Ascension as Jesus says that he will remain in the world no longer and that he is returning to his Father (although the disciples will remain in the world).

When Jesus became Incarnate, he left behind all the glory and honour that were his by rights as the Son of God, now, as he approaches his death, when he would be separated for the first time in all eternity as he bore our sins on the cross, he looks forward to the time when he will be taken back to heaven to be restored to his rightful place at the right hand of the Father.

The incarnation was, of necessity, a once and for all time event – to say otherwise is to negate the uniqueness and effectiveness of the sacrifice Jesus offered on the cross and now as Jesus looks to the completion of his mission, Jesus was preparing the disciples for his return to his place of

honour and glory at the right hand of his Father in heaven and also for the fundamental change in the relationship between Jesus and the disciples.

The significance of the Ascension is that it marks the end of the Incarnation and Jesus' return to glory in heaven. We have confirmation that Jesus has indeed been restored to the glory that is his a little later on in Acts (7:56). As Stephen is stoned by the crowds, just before he dies, he looks up to the heavens and sees Jesus in glory seated at the right hand of the Father.

So far this all sounds very closed and final, Jesus taken up into heaven leaving his disciples behind to wonder (literally) what on earth happened next but this was just the next step in God's glorious plan of salvation.

I don't know if you're anything like our family but we always seem to be coming and going hither and thither. When I was at college, as my parents were living in Wales then, fond farewells at the start of term usually took place on platform 1 of Neath station which, it has to be said was (and still is) a bleak and desolate spot as the buildings seemed to be designed to funnel the wind and direct it along the platform to buffet anyone waiting there and being Wales, it was usually accompanied by plenty of rain and rather than being taken up into heaven, I was taken up by an InterCity 125 train.

Today with one of the boys studying abroad and one at Leeds, its either Liverpool or Manchester Airport or platform 1 at Warrington Central but through the inevitable sadness of these partings, I'm always reminded of one of my mum's favourite sayings which is that with no partings there'd be no meetings and Scripture assures us of two things, that although Jesus has been taken from us, God is always with us through the indwelling of the person of the Holy Spirit and that we will meet Jesus in person once again.

Thinking back to when I was at college over 30 years ago, having bade my fond farewells, I would eagerly await a hand written letter from my mum which would appear in my pigeon-hole once or twice a week (to which I would dutifully reply) and in addition, I would usually phone home from the phone box on the street corner at the back of college on a Sunday afternoon (I would ring them and then they would ring me back on that number). 30 years on an communications technology has changed out of all recognition and today, our boys use email, text messaging, mobile phones and Skype to keep in touch. If we had a letter from either of them it would probably be illegible and I'm not sure they would know how to use a public phonebox.

We can only begin to wonder at what the disciples must have been thinking as they stood there and watched Jesus being taken up into the clouds. Just as in the aftermath of the crucifixion and the resurrection a little over a month previously, nothing like this had ever happened before and none of them knew what happened next! Just before he was taken up into heaven, Jesus told the disciples that they would receive power

when the Holy Spirit came on them and that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

The disciples then witnessed the remarkable sight of the person with whom they had shared just about every moment of their waking lives with for the past three years or so and who they now confessed as Lord and Christ disappear into the clouds (not exactly something that happens every day).

On the face of it, they must have thought that their relationship with Jesus had come to a very abrupt end but in reality, through the gift of the Holy Spirit whose coming was promised by Jesus and which we celebrate next Sunday at the feast of Pentecost, they had and we have the joy of knowing God's presence with us all day, every day and every-where.

The Incarnation was, as we have already explored, of necessity a time limited once and for all time event. With redemption accomplished, Jesus returned to his rightful place of glory in the heavens but God doesn't intend us to be alone.

In his prayer for the disciples that we read from John's gospel Jesus prays that the disciples would be protected against the attacks of the world (who hated Jesus and would hate them) and the devil who whilst he would be defeated by Jesus on the cross never the less remained and remains a formidable enemy.

And even though Jesus is ascended into heaven, he hasn't left us to fend for ourselves. We have the word of God recorded in the Scriptures (which as Timothy tells us are God breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness), we have the armour of God, described by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians and we also have the Holy Spirit as God's living, breathing presence dwelling within us but more of that next week.

As we come to a close now, I want to remind us that although the Ascension marked the point when Jesus was taken back up into heaven, Scripture promises that he will return again to earth one day. Traditionally we focus on the second coming of Christ during the season of Advent but it is also appropriate to do so now, as we celebrate the Ascension for it is good to be reminded that whilst Jesus has been taken up into heaven, he promises he will come again one day.

We know two things for certain about the second coming. The first is that we don't know when Christ will come again – Jesus tells the disciples this immediately before he is taken up into heaven – it isn't for you to know the time or the date the Father has set by his own authority he says. Elsewhere we read that not even Jesus himself knows the day or the time. The signs of the end of the age (wars, rumours of wars, famines, earthquakes) are all around us and we live in the end times (the days between the first and second comings) but we still have no idea when Jesus will come again – rather we must live prepared for the fact that he

could come again this afternoon, tomorrow, later this week or may be in the next century or millenium.

The second thing we know for certain is that when Jesus comes again it will not be as a babe in a manger but with all his might, majesty, dominion and power After Jesus is taken up into heaven, two men address the disciples and ask them why they are staring up into heaven after Jesus. This same Jesus will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven.

When Jesus comes again, it will be as judge of all the world and we will each stand before him. For those who know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour there will be nothing to fear for as those piercing eyes look upon us, they won't see a miserable sinner but one who is sinless because they have accepted the pardon made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. To these Jesus will command to enter heaven and the eternal life that is knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ. For those who have rejected the forgiveness that is to be found in Christ through faith in his death on the cross, I'm afraid Scripture is clear that a very different fate awaits.

So, as we consider the Ascension, it is a time for celebration, for we remember that Jesus having been made man and lived and died here on earth is now ascended back to his rightful place in glory. It is a time to remember the promises Jesus made to his disciples at the ascension that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and we look forward to celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit next weekend but the Ascension is also a time to be reminded of God's promise that he will return from heaven at a date and time even he doesn't know and that this time he will return in glory as judge of all the earth.

Jeremy Hunns