

## Sermon Sunday after Ascension, 16 May 2021

Luke 24 v. 50-53

**T**he eleven went to Galilee for that is where Jesus promised to meet them and where the women had been directed to go. It was on a mountain that Jesus would take his leave from them. We come then, to the end of the Gospel story, as it is written.

**H**ere we listen to the last words of Luke's description of Jesus' departure. The time to make earnest preparation for the propagation of the gospel throughout the world had now arrived and Jesus was going on to higher things. The apostles must proclaim the truth and the will of God to the world. They must baptise and baptism must be regarded as a sign and a seal of the righteousness of Christ accepted by faith.

**W**hen through the preaching of the word person has been brought from darkness into light and confesses the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be the one object of their faith, hope and love then the sacrament of baptism is the sign and seal that God the Father adopts them as his child and heir.

**I**n this last meeting Christ did three things. First he assured them of his power. Surely nothing was outside the power of him who had died and conquered death. Now they were servants of a master whose authority upon earth and in heaven was beyond all question. Second he gave them a commission. He sent them out to make all the world his disciples. Third he promised them his presence.

**I**t must have been a staggering thing for a group of humble Galileans to be sent forth for the conquest of the world. But no sooner was the command given them than the promise followed. They were sent out, as we are, on the greatest task in history but with them was the greatest presence in the world. The description of the ascension in Luke's gospel "Jesus led them out as far as Bethany and he raised his hands and blessed them and as he was blessing them he parted from them and was borne up into heaven."

**T**here's wide consensus in New Testament teaching that Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father. Today, I want to focus on two aspects of the story that are of primary importance for us. First we are dealing with a validation process - the validation of the work of Christ. The ascension is the sealing and perfecting of the renewal of human nature by Christ. Against the catastrophe of evil and sin there is the possibility of the life of grace. There is happy ending, a supernatural existence in what the fourth gospel calls eternal life. There is invincible grace, the power and glory of God which offers freedom and joy. The work of Christ makes it possible that human beings for whom Christ died might be caught into the glory of God's fulfilled creation. Now we can be part of the kind of thing that can happen when human nature reaches its true end.

**T**he second aspect of the story is that it is the culmination of the resurrection gospel. Through the church's year we deal with different periods of Christ's life, the activity and teaching, the events of his death, the meetings and experiences of his resurrection and finally with the period and decisions after he has gone.

**J**esus' departure is not just the conclusion of a sequence of resurrection appearances. It is, as Matthew's gospel shows us, the first movement in the creation of a worldwide mission and witness of the church in the power of the Spirit. The universal nature of Jesus' authority is now to be realised in the world as the church's mission spreads out. The church acts out in history the lordship already realised in Jesus' heavenly life - the life which makes him free to pour out God's Spirit.

**S**o the ascension teaches us of the universal dimension of God's power. When we see the perfect renewal of human nature by Christ we can believe that the human being, despite the

constraints of sin, can be constantly open to and completed by the supernatural life of God. From this story we learn that the glory that belongs to the supernatural life of God is not something operating totally outside our nature as human beings - it is something that belongs to our nature. The natural and the supernatural modes are made for one another; they interpenetrate one another.

**W**e suppose Jesus was a human being completely irradiated by the glory of God. It is the hope for us of the kind of thing that can happen when human nature has reached its true fulfilment. The ascension must always remain a mystery for it attempts to put into words what is beyond words and describes what is beyond description. There had to come a day of dividing when the Jesus of earth became the Christ of heaven. To the disciples the ascension was three things.

**F**irst, it was an ending; the days when their faith was close to a flesh and blood person were over. Now they were linked to someone who was for ever independent of space and time. Second it was a beginning. The disciples left with great joy because they now knew that they had a master from whom nothing could separate them any more. And third, they had the great task of mission to fulfil in the culmination of the resurrection. The Gospel convinces us of the universal relevance of Jesus to all aspects of human life, individual and global.

**T**he ascension offers us participation in the glory and liberty of the exalted Christ. The present possibility of a share in Jesus' loving union with the Father is a life of both trustfulness and authority. What we celebrate today is the crowning of the purpose of Jesus' life and death and the restoration of the fellowship between heaven and earth.

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