

Sermon – between Ascension and Pentecost

Acts 1.6-14 - The Ascension of Jesus

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’⁷ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But 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.’⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.¹¹ They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away.¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

John 17.1-11 - Jesus Prays for His Disciples

17 After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,² since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.⁵ So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

6 ‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

There is something wonderfully human – and slightly absurd – about the disciples in the opening of Acts. Jesus has risen from the dead. The tomb is empty. Death itself has been defeated. The Spirit has been promised. The future of the Church is poised to burst into history in a way that will reshape the world forever. And yet the disciples’ first question to the risen Christ is essentially this: “So... now? Is this it? Is this the moment everything finally gets sorted?” I’m paraphrasing but

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

You can almost hear the impatience. It is the spiritual equivalent of children in the back of a car asking, five minutes into a long journey, "Are we there yet?"

... and before we become too critical of them, we should admit that humanity has always been obsessed with timing. We long to know when life will settle down. When grief will stop catching us off guard. When relationships will heal. When the Church will grow again. When the future will feel manageable. When God will finally make complete sense.

We cannot know the future, yet we try to create the illusion that we can control it. We plan obsessively, we strategize, we catastrophise, and fill our diaries and spreadsheets and calendars as though organisation itself might somehow save us.

I suspect that is partly why people speak about "mid-life crises." Though I have always struggled with the logic of that phrase. How can anyone know it is mid-life? We do not know when we are going to die. It could be a three-quarter-life crisis. It could simply be a Thursday afternoon. Perhaps most of adulthood is just an ongoing crisis occasionally interrupted by cups of tea and biscuits.

But beneath the humour lies something deeply serious. Human beings struggle profoundly with uncertainty, and today's readings sit exactly in that uncomfortable space between certainty and uncertainty; between promise and fulfilment; between Ascension and Pentecost. Jesus is leaving. The Spirit has not yet come. The disciples are waiting in a space they cannot control. Perhaps that is one of the hardest spiritual disciplines of all: waiting without panicking. Waiting without forcing resolution before its time.

Acts tells us that after the Ascension the disciples gather together in prayer, and it is important to notice what the Ascension actually means, because Christians sometimes talk about it in ways that unintentionally make it sound faintly ridiculous. The Ascension is not Jesus floating upward like some kind of divine astronaut. Luke is not attempting to explain atmospheric physics. The Ascension is theology, not aerospace engineering. It is the declaration that the crucified and risen Christ now reigns over all things. Jesus does not disappear into distance. He enters into authority.

But the disciples still experience loss; the Christian faith never pretends that theological truth removes emotional reality.

They know the resurrection is true – and still feel uncertain. They know Christ is Lord – and still retreat into rooms to pray because they do not fully know what comes next.

I find that deeply comforting, because Christians sometimes quietly assume that mature faith means emotional certainty at all times – as though holiness means becoming emotionally laminated: calm, polished, composed and unaffected.

... but the disciples are hopeful and frightened and faithful and confused all at once. Which, if we are honest, is probably a far more accurate description of most churches than we admit aloud; and then Jesus says something extraordinary:

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” In other words: you do not get the timetable. That is difficult for us because we love timetables. We love strategic plans and measurable outcomes and growth trajectories and mission action plans. And some of those things are useful. The Church should not confuse chaos with holiness.

... but the kingdom of God has never been fully containable within human planning. The Church is not born through control, but through dependence. Not through certainty, but through trust. Not through possessing God, but through receiving God. ...and then comes the promise:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

Notice what Jesus does not say. He does not say, “You will receive explanations.” He does not say, “You will receive complete emotional closure.” He does not say, “You will receive a spreadsheet outlining the next thirty years of ecclesial development.”

He says: “You will receive power.”

In the New Testament, power is almost never what human beings instinctively imagine. It is not domination. It is not image-management. It is not the power to appear impressive. It is the power to witness. The power to remain faithful. The power to love beyond fear. The power to become a people shaped by the life of Christ.

... and that brings us into John 17, where we overhear Jesus praying. Not teaching about prayer. Not giving a seminar on prayer. Actually praying, and what Jesus prays for is remarkable.

He does not first pray for institutional success or public influence or numerical growth. He prays for relationship. "Father, glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you." Now in John's Gospel, glory does not primarily mean heavenly brightness or supernatural spectacle. Glory means the fullness of God's character becoming visible. And where is that glory most clearly revealed? On the cross.

Which means that for John, glory looks like self-giving love. Not triumphalism. Not domination. Love. Costly love. Visible love. Wounded love. ... And then Jesus says this: "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me."

In the ancient world, knowing someone's name meant far more than possessing information about them. It meant relationship, character, presence. Jesus does not simply provide theological information about God. He reveals what God is actually like, and that is really important because many people – including many Christians – quietly carry distorted images of God: a God who is permanently disappointed, perpetually irritated, always waiting for failure.

But when Christians want to know what God is like, we do not begin with abstraction. We look at Jesus. Jesus touching lepers nobody else would touch. Jesus feeding crowds who had nothing to offer him. Jesus forgiving enemies while hanging on a cross. Jesus washing feet. Jesus weeping at gravesides. Jesus restoring failures.

This is the God Christians proclaim, and then Jesus prays something deeply tender: "Protect them." Jesus knows the disciples are fragile. The Church is fragile. Human beings are fragile. And yet God entrusts the Gospel to fragile people anyway.

That has always fascinated me. If I were designing a global salvation project, I would probably not choose anxious fishermen, doubters and confused disciples. I would at least want a slightly stronger communications department. Yet throughout Scripture, God seems strangely committed to working through people who do not fully know what they are doing. Which, frankly, is encouraging for clergy.

Ultimately the Church survives because Christ holds it, not because we manage it perfectly, and perhaps that is why these readings matter so much now, because we live in anxious times. People fear for the future – the future of society, politics, the economy, the Church. Some of those fears are entirely understandable.

But Ascension faith refuses both naïve optimism and despair, because the centre of Christian hope is not human progress. It is the reign of the risen Christ. The ascended Jesus is not absent from the world. He is Lord within it. Even now. Even amid war and grief and confusion and uncertainty.

And so the disciples wait. They pray. They remain together. Before the preaching. Before the miracles. Before Pentecost. Before the growth.

Prayer. The Church begins not with frantic activity, but with waiting together before God, and perhaps we need to hear that again, because modern life trains us to believe our worth lies in productivity. But the kingdom of God begins with receptivity – with people who do not yet know what comes next, but trust the One who does.

And I think that this is what faith finally is. Not possessing certainty about every outcome. Not controlling the future. Not pretending we are unafraid. But remaining faithful in the waiting. Holding hope without pretending control. Living in the strange space between Ascension and Pentecost.

And discovering, there, that Christ is still present among his people.