

## Ascension

24 5 09

Grant, we pray, almighty God,  
that as we believe your only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
to have ascended into the heavens,  
so we in heart and mind may also ascend  
and with him continually dwell.

My text this morning is taken from the reading from Acts set for Ascension Day itself, "Lord is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom of Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." (1 v7)

Do you ever stop and think about the nature of time? One of the distinguishing features of being human is just that, our sense of the passage of time. We are awake, aware and we know that time passes and that inevitably we are growing old or at least older. Last week, with a glass of kir, we celebrated the extension of my contract here as your priest: a further three years to help to grow the church in this place. On Monday, we had the funeral service here in church of our brother in Christ, Robin Tchertoff, who had lived a full and varied life, celebrating his eightieth birthday in the year of his death. To us and to him, life seems linear. We have a beginning which we mark with our birthday and we have an end marked by our death, though as Christians our hope is in the resurrection from

the dead and the life of the world to come. So for us time seems like a line with a beginning and an end, from the present moment stretching back into the past and forward into the future.

Today is the Sunday after Ascension Day and we take this opportunity to look back at one of the key moments in the life of Christ. There are five: his *Incarnation* when he was conceived by God then born of the Virgin Mary; his *Crucifixion*, when he was executed on a cross by order of Pontius Pilate; his *Resurrection* when he on the third he rose again from the dead; his *Ascension* into heaven when forty days after vacating his tomb, he ascended into heaven; and finally his *Second Coming* which will mark the dawning of a new age when he will come again to judge both the living and the dead.

There are two questions I should like to consider this morning in relation to his Ascension: when and where.

Firstly, 'when?' I don't mean literally 'when did the Ascension take place.' According to Acts 1 v3, Jesus had appeared to his disciples for forty days after the Resurrection which places Ascension Day on a Thursday, ten days before Pentecost and since both days depend on the date of Easter, like Easter their precise date each year varies depending on the timing of the full moon. Instead, my question 'when' refers to my text this morning: "Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." The disciples want to know when, when will the kingdom of God come, when will the new age dawn?

And Jesus tells them that it is not for them to know. Their question is a good one. They were expecting the new age to dawn with the coming of the Messiah. Jesus has come so the disciples are wondering, thinking out loud, does it mean the new age is about to dawn too? There is no answer. Jesus refuses to tell them. From our viewpoint, it is because there is no simple answer to their question because there are two timescales. In one sense, the Kingdom of God has come with the spread of the gospel; in another sense it is still to come with the Second Coming. So for the present, the Kingdom of God is a work in progress; it is what we are working towards in our Christian life; it is the reason for the existence of the Church in general and of our church here at St Bartholomew's, Dinard.

Secondly, 'where?' Luke's description of the Ascension is of Jesus being 'lifted up' and a cloud taking 'him out of their sight.' The implication is that heaven is upwards and this would fit the then contemporary Jewish world view with the earth below and heaven somewhere above, beyond the dome of the sky which encircles the earth. This sense of heaven being above and the earth being below accords nicely with our sense of space: in front or behind; to the right or to the left; above or below. But God is not only outside time, he is also outside of space. It may be convenient for our spatial sense to think of heaven and of God as being above us and in one sense, not a literal sense, they are. But what Luke presents us with is a picture of the reality of Jesus defying the law of gravity and of moving upwards to be with his Father, to sit at the right hand of God until such time that he returns as Judge.

So this morning on this Sunday after Ascension, with my questions when and where, I invite you to reflect on the nature of time and place. As human beings, we have a sharp sense of time and place because that is how we make sense of the world around us, by our sense of the passage of time and our sense of where we are. But God is a God beyond time and place. He is always there. He is everywhere all the time. When we cease to be, we will still be with God our Father, the apple of his eye.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's Dinard*

*24<sup>th</sup> May, 2009*

H: Sermon 20: Ascension

