

Ascension

1 6 14

O God the king of glory,
you have exalted your only son Jesus Christ
with great triumph to the kingdom of heaven;
we beseech you, leave us not comfortless,
but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us
and exalt us to the place
where our Saviour Jesus Christ is gone before.

Our text today may be found in Acts chapter 1 and verse 11:

'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?'

It's all over. It's done. It is complete. The work started some thirty-three years previously is now ended in a most startling and dramatic way. The work begun in the Incarnation, glorified by the Crucifixion, confirmed by the Resurrection is here finished in the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven.

The drama is nicely captured in our Ascension window, kindly donated to St Bart's by the Forbes Villiers Curtis family. The eleven remaining disciples and the Blessed Virgin Mary are astonished as Jesus is lifted up and disappears from their sight, concealed by a cloud in the sky. Our window presents that gravity-defying moment when his feet first leave the earth but before they are the last thing they see as Jesus leaves his disciples for the second time in forty-three days.

So we come to the end of a chapter but not the end of the work. The work started by Jesus and taken on by the twelve disciples, now apostles, having been sent out to spread the good news, is now, some two thousand years on, our task to do. Whether here in church or at a Teddy Bears' Picnic or an English Garden Party, wherever we are, we are, as Christians, charged to pass on the Good News that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, our Saviour, that he is in fact risen, ascended and glorified. But how you do so is not really for me to say but for you to discover how best to do. Whether it be in how kind you are to animals in general or dogs in particular; the support you give to the Banque Alimentaire to help feed the needy; whether it is the way you talk and listen to your friends, neighbours and those who you meet by chance during the day, it's really best for you to find out how best you can show being a Christian makes a real difference on account of what we believe to be true.

So the Ascension marks not so much an end but a new beginning. One thing is ended but the work is still to be done: like the washing up that gathers daily in our sinks, the work of God will always be there to be done till at least individually we find our own rest with the saints in heaven.

The idea that the work remains unfinished was forcefully brought home to me in one of the Bible Studies taken by Dr Clare Amos at our Archdeaconry Synod last month at St Jacut. We were looking at the end of Mark's gospel and there are two different endings - one long; one short. But the revolutionary thought Clare offered us was that the original gospel may have finished at verse 8 'So they went out and fled from the tomb for terror and amazement had seized them; and they

said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.’ The last word Mark uses is the conjunction γάρ (gar) which in English means ‘because’ or ‘for’. Now Mark’s Greek may not have been the best in the world, and mine is non-existent, (though thankfully for me Doreen Collier is only a telephone call away) but in Greek, it is not the done thing normally to end a sentence with a conjunction. So if Mark does, then there must be a real reason for him to do so other than incompetence and Mark’s reason may be that he is telling us the work is incomplete, the story unfinished – in musical terms his gospel ends with an imperfect rather than the expected perfect cadence ! And not only is the work not finished, it is something we ourselves should not be afraid to be doing by passing on the good news that Jesus Christ is in fact risen from the dead.

But let me leave you with one more thing on which to reflect: the mood of the disciples as they went back to Jerusalem. Luke writes at the end of his gospel that they ‘returned to Jerusalem with great joy’ (24 v52). How very different from the grief and tears and desolation they had felt the last time he was taken from them on Good Friday. Then their hope in him with his death had seemed dashed. Now their faith in him is seen to be true with what they saw with their eyes being confirmed by what the two men in white robes – undoubtedly a pair of angels – told them which forms part of our text today: ‘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’

If they were joyful then, then so should we too be now – there is every reason to be so and we should pass it on.

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

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G: Sermons 29 : Ascension

