

Sermon for 26th May 2022, Ascension Day, Year C.

Preached at All Saints Biddenden

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

Sermon

I've heard, though I've not seen it for myself, that Peterborough cathedral has some very beautiful stone vaulting across its ceiling, decorated at each intersection by an ornamental boss. Each boss is carved with some sort of Christian symbol, like a cross and so on. On one boss however, you will apparently see the outline of two feet. These are, of course, the soles of Jesus' feet disappearing up into heaven on Ascension Day!

When we read this story, both at the end of Luke's Gospel, and also the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, it's perhaps not all that easy to get excited about. Easter had an exuberance, a release from Lent, the glory of resurrection with its hope for the future. And the great Christian festival of Pentecost is only ten days away, celebrating the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the Church with fiery red vestments, magnified even further this year by the coinciding Platinum Jubilee of our monarch.

Ascension on the other hand has Jesus saying farewell to the disciples with a vague promise of power to come, and then this weird image of him floating up into the clouds like Superman, until only his feet are visible; and then the disciples are left alone with their thoughts. I do wonder how they felt. They had only just got Jesus back, forty days ago at the Resurrection, and now suddenly he's leaving again, and this time for good.

So, what is the Ascension about? What can we learn from it about God, and about God's mission in the world? As is usual when God's involved, I think there are multiple overlapping meanings at play, and I want to offer you two ideas to think about this morning.

The first idea is that the Ascension is a completion or fulfilment of many Old Testament promises and ideas. For example, clouds are often described in the bible as concealing divinity, which would otherwise be too overwhelming for humanity to experience.

So, Jesus disappearing into the clouds demonstrates that he has been received back into the presence of God. His ascension was therefore greeted by the Church as validation that Jesus is the Messiah, and the claim that Jesus is victorious over death.

Ascension also echoes what happened to the two main Jewish prophets, Elijah and Moses. Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot while his disciple Elisha watched, and the Jewish historian Josephus claimed that Moses too, by tradition, didn't die but was taken up directly into God's presence, disappearing into a cloud.

You'll remember that at the Transfiguration, Jesus meets with Elijah and Moses on the mountain, all three shining in glorious splendour, and they talk about Jesus' departure which he will shortly accomplish at Jerusalem. Some scholars say that the two men in white robes who ask the disciples "why are you staring up into heaven?" are in fact also Moses and Elijah. So, those men say to the disciples, "This Jesus, who has been taken into heaven, will return the same way," they are perhaps speaking about something they know from personal experience!

Suffice it to say that the Ascension doesn't happen as some one-off event with no particular meaning. It's clearly a continuation and a validation of a long and complex story reaching back into the earliest Jewish tradition. The Ascension tells us that this was all part of God's plan. It has his fingerprints all over it, so to speak, like a master storyteller revealing the plot at the end of a mystery novel.

That's the first idea. The second idea, the second meaning of the Ascension, doesn't look back into the Old Testament, but looks forward at what is to come. So long as Jesus was in the world, all eyes and hearts were fixed on him, and he was only available to those he physically encountered. But when he departs, he leaves space for the disciples to turn their attention to the world.

We often find in scripture and in literature that a mentor must depart the scene before their disciples or followers can fully embrace their full potential. Just as Jesus needs to leave before the disciples can receive the Holy Spirit, so also Moses needed to leave before Joshua was able to embody the spirit of wisdom that Moses had placed on him, and Elijah's ascent into heaven was necessary before Elisha could receive a double portion of his prophetic spirit.

Fans of Star Wars will also no doubt remember that both of Luke Skywalker's mentors, Obiwan Kenobi and Yoda, gave up their lives so that Luke could reach his full potential. And possibly we've experienced this ourselves – perhaps there was someone we looked up and sought to emulate for many years, but it was only when we were left to fend for ourselves that we discovered what we'd truly learned, and who we truly are.

Rowan Williams, our former archbishop, has said that this 'giving way' is characteristic of the Trinity. Each of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit seeks not to gain pride of place, but to give place to the others, so that they too can most fully be what they are. In this way, the divine Trinity models for us the true nature of community, in which selfishness and self-promotion give way to a chorus of mutual participation, support and affection.

The Ascension, then, is not Jesus abandoning us, but giving us the space in which to flourish and thrive and become everything we can be. The Ascension is no longer about Jesus, but about us. The focus shifts from Jesus' ministry to our ministry. Since Jesus is no longer here to preach good news, ensure we're included, heal the sick or feed the hungry, this task now falls to us.

I wonder if you know that famous prayer attributed to St Teresa of Avila: “God of Love, help us to remember that Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world. Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now. Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.” There’s no question that this is daunting. Many of us perhaps wish the Ascension had never happened, and Jesus was still here on earth. Why else would we appoint bishops and vicars to represent Christ for us? But God’s plan was always for all of us to become Christ together, not just worship and applaud him as his feet disappear up into the rafters.

It turns out it’s quite hard to end a sermon on the Ascension. Maybe that’s because the event itself is not really an end. The departure of Jesus from the earth was not marked by a tearful final goodbye, but by a blessing; Jesus ascended while offering that blessing, and this blessing never came to an end.

But even so, the disciples didn’t immediately begin their ministry; they didn’t move immediately from the old ways to the new; they entered a period of uncertainty and waiting, a liminal period when Jesus had gone, but the Holy Spirit had not yet arrived. This cannot have been unintentional. I wonder if God was giving them space to ponder and reflect, to consider who they really are as a community, without Jesus physically being among them to guide them step by step.

In ten days’ time, we will be celebrating the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the empowering of Christians to live out the lives of love to which we are called, and for which we yearn. But although we know how that story goes, I don’t think we should rush there too soon. There’s much to be gained from staying awhile longer with the uncertainty of the disciples, with their wondering about what sort of people they are to become, and their nervous, expectant prayers.