

THE HOMECOMING

Acts 1. 15-17, 21-26

1 John 5. 9-13

John 17. 6-19

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We are in Ascensiontide. Ascension Day, which was last Thursday, is forty days after Easter Day. During those forty days since the discovery of his empty tomb, our Lord revealed his Resurrection to his disciples in many ways. He showed them that he had been raised in a spiritual body. He showed them his wounded hands and side. He appeared in their midst when they had locked the door for safety. He ate and drank with them. He walked with them, taught them that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and die before entering into his glory, broke bread with them, and vanished. They saw him in Jerusalem. Then they saw him in Galilee. He appeared to individuals. He even appeared to 500 disciples at one time.¹ Finally, in a climactic appearance, he commissioned them to wait for the coming of the Spirit and then to preach the Gospel to the world and baptise the nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That was at the time of his Ascension. The Spirit descended ten days later, fifty days after Easter Day, on Pentecost, which we shall celebrate next Sunday.

Where was Jesus, the risen Lord, in between these appearances to his disciples? He didn't rent a room in Jerusalem, and he wasn't staying – as he once did – in Peter's house in Galilee. He was ascended at the right hand of the Father, the place of power and judgement in God's reign. The disciples experienced the Lord's Resurrection and Ascension, and the Descent of the Spirit, as a sequence in time. Yet these

¹ Cf. 1 Cor 15. 1-6.

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Church

The Sunday after Ascension – The Seventh Sunday of Easter

13th May 2018

mysteries, following Jesus's death on the cross, are *one*: one whole movement of grace, and they constitute the good news of the Gospel which has created the Church to this day.

I know one teenager who, when he was first taught some of these things, thought that the Ascension was a bad deal. He said to me, 'God gets Jesus, and we get the Church. That's not a deal.' And if you remember, the first disciples seem to have thought along similar lines. But Christ said to them, it is good for you that I go away; for then the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, will come to you and lead you into all truth. As ever, our Lord is right and true. Had the Ascension and the Descent of the Spirit not happened, history would have been very different; and we would not know the Gospel today. We would not be Christians at all. The Ascension is very good news.

We have already seen that without the Ascension and without Christ's consequent replacement of his bodily presence by the Holy Spirit, the world (and we ourselves) would not know Jesus. But the Spirit transformed the disciples to preach and teach the nations; to baptise them into Christ; to heal sickness and drive out evil; and to celebrate the Sacraments. Our Lord's visibility and presence with us has by the Spirit passed to the Word and Sacraments; and to the fellowship and service of the Church, which is his visible Body.

But God has done something himself, in himself and for us, in Jesus's Ascension. The Ascension completes what was begun in the body of the Virgin Mary, then at Christmas, and then all through Christ's life and work, climaxing in his Passion. In all this, God has prepared a place *for us within himself*. He has taken our Humanity home, right into the Trinity, in Jesus Christ. The Son has completed his mission, his Incarnation and solidarity with us, his Atonement for our sins, his Victory over our death. He has repaired the breach and ended the exile we began for ourselves with our sins.

We think of the Ascension as going *up*; but it also goes *deep*: deep into the heart of God. God, who transcends all time and space, has now prepared a place, *a home*, for us. We call it heaven. In the world, we have tribulation. In heaven (or shall I say in God), we will have peace and joy. In the world, we are exiles and strangers; in God, we are *home*, and by faith we have begun our pilgrimage to that home.

When we close our prayers with the phrase, ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord’, it is as if we are literally calling home. We are laying claim to our Lord’s place in the heart of God, to the eternal Son who has finished his journey from heaven into our far away country, like a shepherd seeking his sheep, to bring us home to safety.

In today’s appointed gospel passage, Jesus prays his high priestly prayer to the Father. He is with his disciples in the Upper Room on the eve of his crucifixion. He says that he is returning to the Father. Concerning his disciples, he prays that they, and we with them, will be one as he and the Father are one. He prays not that his followers will be taken out of the world, but that they will be kept from evil and the evil one (the devil). He prays that we will make our pilgrimage faithfully home to him; and that when we get there, we will share his joy and that our joy will be complete. In today’s lesson from Acts, following Christ’s Ascension, we see the apostles organising themselves for their future ministry. Under God’s guidance, they appoint a new member to their team. And then they continue to pray and wait for the Spirit to begin the Pentecostal dispensation – a time which includes us here and now, and which runs until our Lord’s glorious return to judge the world.

‘God put his power to work in Christ, when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come.

And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Eph 1. 19-23).

No one likes partings from those whom we love. The teenager to whom I referred earlier had difficulty with Jesus's crucifixion. He thought that it was terrible. He did not like the parting: Christ goes to God, and we are left with the Church. But later on, that teenager came to a new understanding. He saw the cross as the climax of our Lord's mission of love. It is the price of our passage *home*. The exchange, the Ascension, is in fact a good deal, and it is arranged by a good God. It shows that God is Love.

Amen.