

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Life after Ascension (Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26)

Sunday 24 May 2009

By David Monteith

Soft cloud, that while the breeze of May
Chants her glad matins in the leafy arch,
Draw'st thy bright veil across the heavenly way
Meet pavement for an angel's glorious march:

Chains of my heart, avaunt I say -
I will arise, and in the strength of love
Pursue the bright track ere it fade away,
My Saviour's pathway to His home above. *John Keble*

So begins John Keble's 19th century poem written for Ascensiontide. Like the sermon I preached on Thursday, it encourages us to rise up and look beyond. As a student in Durham, we marked Ascension Day by climbing to the top of the cathedral tower to be met by the choir who would sing from there 'God has gone up!' But just as the news came through on Wednesday that Ranulph Fiennes had become the first pensioner to climb Everest, no sooner had he got to the top than the following day he had to climb back down again. Now on the Sunday after Ascension, where do we find the witnesses of these events and what do we find them doing after their head in the clouds experience?

Luke's gospel finishes with the Ascension of Jesus. It tells that the disciples returned to Jerusalem with joy and that they were continually in the temple blessing God (Luke 24:50-53). The story then gets picked up by Luke again in the Acts of the Apostles. But this time we are told that when they return to Jerusalem, they go to an upper room (1:13). We are told that some of Jesus' family are there and they are staying with the 11 remaining disciples – Judas having betrayed Jesus and them.

In the week of the Chelsea Flower Show I should point out to you *Cercis siliquastrum* which you pass by on the way into church. This Mediterranean tree is commonly called a Judas Tree because by tradition it is the tree upon which he hanged himself. But Luke tells a different story about Judas - instead of hanging himself, he went out and bought a field that became known as the Field of Blood because he subsequently fell in it and tore himself bleeding to death! Either way, Judas is firmly out of the story but the gap that he has left turns out to be significant – 11 disciples does not say the same as 12.

Jesus met and feasted in the upper room with the twelve. Through feet washing and sharing the blessed cup and bread a new community was created that had the marks of God's kingdom – peace, equality, service, love, mercy, forgiveness and feasting. The bible speaks of that kingdom in terms of the messiah and there being a new Israel. According to Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples frame their questions to Jesus before his ascension in terms of when will a new Israel be established. They understood Jesus to be bringing about in some sense a renewed life that could be best described as a new Israel - a renewed social, political, individual and spiritual reality.

They made the connection with the 12 disciples in some ways now symbolising the 12 tribes of Israel and so they had a very practical problem to resolve before they could really do anything else. They were eleven not twelve. Two names were suggested about whom we hardly know anything – Matthias and Justus. They set the criteria for apostleship to be someone who had been with them from the beginning witnessing the baptism of Jesus, through his ministry of care. Teaching, healing and ultimately witnessing his death, resurrection and ascension. There had to be a very direct personal connection. They choose the person by lot after prayer. Matthias got it, indicating

I think that the choice ultimately was not theirs but God's. But choosing by lot also making connection with how a sacrificial victim was chosen in Old Testament times. Apostles were described as witnesses, the Greek word being *martur* from which we get martyr, making the overt connection with the experience of the early church. They have again taken an old established idea, held on to it yet developed it in a new way reflecting the new reality which they have discovered in order that the newly forming church might have authenticity and vitality.

Sometimes it is easy to begin to believe that the church does not matter as much as God matters. People say it all the time that 'they believe' and 'they don't need to come to church'. Church sometimes doesn't do itself any favours as was so clearly revealed this week in the horrendous reports of sustained abuse that took place at the hands of clergy, monks and nuns within Ireland. It is very easy to dismiss that the church has anything important to say or that it's got integrity and authenticity really worth pursuing.

It would have been very easy for the first disciples to simply say that they have seen and come close to the essence of God's kingdom without the need for a church. Those who had witnessed the ascension could have further spiritualised matters, making God's story the one that really mattered. But instead they went back to their familiar place, the upper room, quite possibly to do their familiar things - break bread, share wine and even wash feet. And they took some key stories and experiences from their past to be like the grammar or syntax for a new language inaugurated by the events of Jesus – in this case things to do with the renewal of Israel. They in effect had to make it real and they did it by subverting things from within for the sake of God and his kingdom.

So the church becomes a new community made up of many stories which flow around stories of Jesus and around signs of another eternal and reliable reality. So this is not church because it is friendly or because there is nice music or a nice vicar or because there is a good school or because children are taken seriously – this is church that has at its heart God's story made known in Jesus, with the story of God's people down the ages. If it's like that we can come to see ourselves as part of it and yet find challenge and question which will raise up our awareness and questionings about God as high as the clouds.

These early disciples knew all about change. They had been through everything. And at least three times they would have thought that things could not get worse – as they watched him die, as they found his body had gone and then as they witnessed him leave the earth for good. But they returned to the familiar things they knew to be important about God, reworking and subverting them from within.

This church and parish is undergoing enormous change especially in its leadership. The challenges are significant and the process of change at times feels hard. But I'd encourage you to take heart from these post Ascension Christians. So long as we have one eye on the Lord who has inaugurated the Kingdom and one eye on his precious church carrying the grammar, syntax and where with all of that Kingdom, there will come to be plenty more opportunities to recast our own stories in this light, creating new witnesses to this glorious Resurrection and astonishing Ascension, moving beyond difficulty towards new life.