

Acts Chapter 1 verses 1 – 11

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.”

So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Luke Chapter 24 verses 44 – 53.

Jesus said to the disciples, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Today is Ascension Day and we are as far after Easter as Ash Wednesday is before it – that is to say, 40 days. We are also 11 days from celebrating Pentecost or Whitsun.

Today we celebrate, in the words of Thomas Kelly (1769 – 1855), the fact that

The head that once was crowned with thorns
is crowned with glory now;
a royal diadem adorns
the mighty victors brow.

The highest place that heaven affords
is his by sovereign right;
the King of kings and Lord of lords,
He reigns in perfect light.

Do you enjoy rollercoasters with their speed, their ups and downs, their twists and turns? I confess that I don't since I am not good with heights or with sudden drops and changes in direction.

The rollercoaster ride – so-to-speak – that the disciples have been on over the last few weeks is still taking them in unexpected directions. Today, that 'ride' takes another twisty turn that takes them in a direction for which they were neither expecting nor prepared.

That rollercoaster ride began when the disciples were with Jesus, at Caesarea Philippi, when he asked them two important questions: 'who do people say that I am?' and 'who do you say I am?'. In response, Peter declared, for the first time, that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. From this pinnacle, the twists and turns started.

Next, Jesus took James, John and Peter up a mountain where he was transfigured before them and they heard the voice of God declare "This is my son. Listen to him".

Next, the disciples had seen Jesus weep at Lazarus' tomb before raising him from the dead.

In due course, they were in the crowd that celebrated as he rode into Jerusalem on a colt as the road was strewn with palms. Later that week, in their presence, Jesus took bread and wine, blessed them and shared them with the disciples. At the same time, he spoke about a new covenant that was sealed in his blood. Jesus then predicted that one of them would betray him. As a group, Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives – where Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, did indeed betray Jesus – with a kiss – so that he was arrested, tried by the Jewish Sanhedrin, denied (three times by Peter) before being handed over to Pontius Pilate. Lastly, he was humiliated and then crucified by the Roman soldiers.

Then, on the third day and just as he had told them, he was raised from the dead and appeared to them in the Upper Room and on the road to Emmaus.

Over the next forty days, Jesus appeared to his disciples again and again and even met with Peter and called him back to his service.

In our readings from Acts and the Gospel that bears his name, Luke recounts that the disciples were once again with Jesus. On this occasion – just as he had with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus – he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures. He told them that they would be his witnesses to Judea, Samaria and to the ends

of the earth and receive what the Father had promised to send them – the Holy Spirit and that they would be clothed with power from on high. Jesus then blessed them and was taken from their sight.

If the disciples weren't already confused and dizzy with the wonderous but scary events that they seen, no doubt they were now. Small wonder that they stood – perhaps open-mouthed – looking up into the sky peering to see where Jesus had gone but knowing that they could not follow. I can't help feeling that the disciples have had a bad press over the years. It seems to me that given the emotional and spiritual rollercoaster ride that they had been on over recent weeks it is not surprising that they were confused and stood looking up to heaven. To be honest, if you were in their shoes, you'd stand looking up into the sky – wouldn't you? After all, their friend, teacher and Lord had just been taken from them. Of course, they wondered where he had gone and whether he was coming back and, if so, when?

But where had Jesus gone? The Old Testament records that both Enoch and Elijah were whisked away into heaven without tasting death. But what were the disciples to make of this occurrence? What was going on? Looking back, it seems that James and John, the sons of Zebedee – or their mother at least – may have grasped where Jesus was going – or were they really just angling for position and social status? She – though whether it was her idea or theirs isn't made clear – went to Jesus and asked him whether her sons could sit at his left and right in heaven. Whether she really understood what she was asking is another story. The bottom line is that Jesus had returned to the Father – just as he had told his disciples that he would.

The confused state of the disciples was interrupted by two men dressed in white. These two men – much as they had said to Mary on that first Easter morn – asked the apparently simple question "Why...". To Mary, the question was why she was looking for Jesus among the dead. On this Ascension Day, the question to the disciples was "... why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back the way that you have seen go into heaven".

What does it mean "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back the way that you have seen go into heaven"? In short, it means that Jesus is not leaving us for good. It also means, perhaps more importantly, that Jesus will be returning but we don't know where or when. When he returns – at what is technically called The Second Coming {The First Coming being that first Christmas} – he will come back as the Son of God with all the glory that the Father has given him. When that happens, 'At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow' (St Paul's words set as a hymn by Caroline Noel {1817 – 77}) and he will be shown to be who is he truly is – God's Messiah and Christ. At the Second Coming, there will be judgement and he will separate the sheep and the goats as the picture painted in Matthew's Gospel of those who loved – or did not love – their neighbour as themselves reminds us.

In these days as the world continues to be wracked by Covid19 and other pains or injustices, we – just like the disciples – may feel as though we are left peering into the sky towards the heavens and wondering 'Where has Jesus gone?' 'Where is God in all of this?' 'What has happened to the Kingdom of God?' 'What now?' or 'What next?'. As Christians, our faith in Jesu – shaky as it may be in the face of difficulties – doesn't make us immune from pain and sorry nor does it give us all the answers to such difficult questions.

And so, we rejoice today in the fact that Jesus – the crucified one – is now seated at the right hand of God the Father where he intercedes for you, for me and for each one of us. He

knows and hears our cries – just as he heard the cries of his people when they were in slavery in Egypt – of ‘What on earth is going on?’. God responds to our pain, despair and frustrations and says to us that he knows and understands it all because he gave his only begotten Son to take on human flesh, to walk amongst us and to die upon the cross for our sins.

But we also rejoice, as the angels told his disciples, that Jesus will come back again on the clouds with his Father’s glory. At that time, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, that he brought into being with his coming in flesh that first Christmas and by dying our death on the cross at that first Easter will be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. When he does return, the new heaven and the earth prophesied by Isaiah and the Book of Revelation will be become visible and all that is wrong with the current world will be put right. In the meantime, we are to pass on to others, and hear for ourselves too – perhaps for the first time or perhaps again (because we have forgotten them) – the words Jesus said to his disciples in the account of the Ascension at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. ... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

To help us in our task, he promises us the Holy Spirit and through that Holy Spirit to dwell deeply and richly within us so that we will be re-made and re-clothed with power from on high so that we, like the disciples, may be his witnesses to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. We may not be sent to Judea or Samaria in a literal sense. However, God does ask us to live out our lives for him where we are – our equivalent of Judea – and through the tasks that he gives us to do to witness for, and to, him. He asks us to do that until Jesus comes again to claim us as his own along with all those who own him as King and Saviour to the glory of God the Father.

May the blessings of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you this Ascension Day and for ever more. Amen.