

Ascension Day: *We are here, because he is there* Daniel 7.9-14; Acts 1.4-11; Luke 24.44-end

Why are we here? What are we doing here, today, gathered as believers? We have just read of Jesus' departure, yet we are told not to be downhearted, like people standing at the quayside or on the platform watching as the ship, or train, disappears into the distance bearing our beloved away.

Ascension is hard to understand. It sounds impossible, fantastic - what is in our minds when we read this story? Was it like the stained glass windows which show Jesus disappearing upwards into a cloud? Did one of his sandals fall off as he went? Why is Ascension harder to imagine than Easter? What did the disciples see - and does it matter?

And why did they return to the city with great joy? Their Lord and master was taken from them! The last time that happened was on Good Friday - what makes this different?

As we look for an answer, please look again at the last thing Jesus said to them. In the gospel reading from Luke 24 - Jesus explains that all of this, all that you have been part of, it was all part of the plan, God's plan, to bring the world back into relationship with himself. And now comes your part!

The theologian Ray Anderson wrote of Jesus life as "ministry in the power of the spirit", as Jesus, in partnership with the Holy Spirit, revealed the difference God could make in people's lives. After the Ascension, and Pentecost - which belong together in this new chapter of the story - we move to the power of the Spirit in ministry - our ministry, guided and empowered by the Spirit in us. The charismatic Pentecostal teacher John Wimber used to say, "this is where we all get to play". We are all invited onto the stage, rather than watching from the seats in the theatre.

This is all part of the plan. Jesus has torn down the barrier between heaven and earth - in theatre or tv terms, the fourth wall has been broken. We are now no longer an audience, we are part of the action. And, as we have been exploring in our pilgrimage this week, the action, the plot, is the reconciliation of all people to God and one another. Scary, but exciting. Christ has taken captivity captive, and it is up to us to make that a reality. We are here because he is there.

In Ascensiontide, we proclaim that Jesus is the eternal King of earth and heaven. There is nowhere outside his reach - but that is revealed now through you and me. Sometimes it's hard to see that in practice, amongst the chaos of the world, and perhaps even worse the chaos of the church. Jesus is King - and we believe that will be revealed to everyone eventually, eternally, but in the meantime we would like to see a bit more evidence of it. We would like to see it in the rubble of Gaza, or in the pettiness and meanness of the church.

Can we turn that longing, that *lament*, into action? To reach out in the power of the Spirit to bring people together, to help people find love, and hope. You will know the words of Theresa of Avila -

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

And if yours are Christ's hands and feet, if your guts are Christ's guts, do not expect them not to be wounded, pierced, nailed to the pain of the world just as his were. Christ's reign on earth is carried forward by us - this is how God's love becomes present.

We see people in *captivity*, to sin, addiction, to the violence and oppression of others - but our scriptures proclaim that *Jesus took captivity captive*. We bear witness that people need not be bound by these destructive patterns of behaviour in themselves or from others. The Spirit will bring freedom. This is the hope, that like sun behind clouds which is always there but may - especially in England, or northern Germany - be more often hidden than revealed, Jesus' reign will eventually break through, and we are witnesses to that.

Jesus is Saviour and king, and so there is hope. And hope, and love are born when human meets human, as sister and brother, and together turn to God.

We look around us at the world, and we look up to the tapestry, which is a vision of heaven - the view from the tapestry looks out to the ruins, the reality of the world. It reminds us that Jesus sees all of that, he looks on with compassion, and we are like the person between Jesus' feet, sharing his gaze, but also ready to walk into the world at his command.

One of the best prayers in our liturgy is one we often use for thanksgiving and dedication at the end of our Communion service. Sadly, it's not the one in our service today, so I'm going to read it for us, and English speakers will probably recognise it. It makes present all I have said today:

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that, when we were still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us so we and all your children shall be free and the whole earth live to praise your name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21