

Looking up

Psalm 47; Acts 1:1-11

Speaking to someone the other day as we reflected on the hopeful signs of the lasting ease of lockdown, my friend said, "Things are looking up." I like that. After a year and more of looking down, and of looking inwards, though there is still some way to go, might there be cause for each one of us to look hopefully? But it's not always easy.

We don't forget that for some looking up is only an alert to incoming missiles from Israeli or Palestinian forces.

We don't forget that looking up only brings more news of Covid variants.

We don't forget that looking up means a final recognition of *what* is no longer here, and *who* is no longer here.

But looking up helps us lift our heads, our eyes, our hearts and see the world and all that is within it head on. It helps us look to the far horizon. It helps us to look forward, even through tears.

I have told you, on previous Ascension Sundays, of St Swithin's Church, Walcot, where there is a stained glass window depicting the Ascension of Jesus. The disciples are standing around, looking upwards. All you can see of Jesus is the lower half of His body as He rockets off into the heavens – His pierced feet dangling down from the top of the window. It is both comical and disturbing at one and the same time.

In our south transept stained glass, one window shows the scene of the crucifixion, the bleakest moment in the Christian story. The suffering, the grief, the death of Jesus. Its twin window is not of the resurrection, as you might expect, but of the Ascension. One of the many benefits of not having pews is that people can walk around the Church and look more easily at the windows. At the end of this service, socially distanced of course, look up and see these windows.

What does the story of the Ascension say to us today?

First, it reminds us that the followers of Jesus will be baptised with the Spirit of God. Whatever the uncertainty, whatever seems missing, and who, the Spirit of God is promised to give us strength.

Second, we are, like the first disciples, called on our own way to share and show our faith. Some will speak, some will pray, some will visit, some will make food, some will make a phone-call, some will send a card, some will bring flowers. But we will share and show our faith. We are all apostles now, and our world has never needed this loving faith of ours more. Showing what it means to be caring and compassionate, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Third, we will face times of wistfulness and wonder. We will not know what to do next, and long for what has been, or what has yet to be. We will gaze into heaven, looking up, until someone says to us, 'What are you doing? Get on with it!' Or until more gently the slow realisation comes that whatever it is that we are facing, whatever challenge or difficulty or doubt or fear, we are the ones who are going to deal with it. Maybe alone, but maybe with those around us who may share some of our sense of challenge, or difficulty, or doubt, or fear.

Though it's cloaked in mystery and wonder, though we may want to read it as a parable about the transition being made from the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of the Church, the Ascension reminds us that the ministry of Jesus *is* the ministry of the Church and we are the ones, today, to make it happen.

Standing around, looking into heaven for a while, the disciples turn around and move on. And in that turning, the Christian church begins to take shape. Out of mystery, which still has a part to play, the disciples were left with the challenge of what to do next. The Church is still responding to that question about what to do next.

The story of the Ascension deals straightforwardly with the fact that this fearful, waiting community, which is anxious and bewildered, has no power of its own. It possesses none and can generate none for itself. It has no privilege and no cause for self-congratulation. And yet, oddly enough, power is given, so this fragile little community finds energy, courage, imagination and resources completely disproportionate to its size.

These continue to be anxious times for our country and our world. The violence in Israel-Palestine. The impact of Covid-19 ebbing and surging around the world. The as yet unquantified educational and psychological damage the pandemic has caused. Businesses that are not sure how they will survive, even when regulations relax; and businesses and jobs already lost. Last

week someone said to me, “I’m passed the depression stage of lockdown; I’m now in the frustration stage.” All of this will have an effect on us directly or indirectly. Are we tempted to look wistfully into the heavens, praying for a Saviour to return? Or, having done that, do we lower our gaze to the far horizon and say, ‘How will we get there?’

The Church is facing a hard time. London’s St Paul’s Cathedral relies heavily on tourist income from ticket sales and has seen its finances devastated by the pandemic. The building’s income dropped by 90% last year as it remained shut, and there has been a similar fall this year. St Paul’s is facing its worst financial crisis in 300 years.

Nearer to home our General Assembly will be debating proposals that will see plans for a significant reduction of ministries and churches. Edinburgh may go down between 20 and 30 churches. This isn’t simply a response to the challenges of the last year, though these have brought things to a head. This is a response to the fact that there are too many churches in Scotland for too few people, a legacy from the Disruption of 1843 when the Church split and too many buildings were built. It is also a response to the call for a Radical Action Plan agreed by the General Assembly for a leaner, more focussed, more fit-for-purpose church. Which sounds exactly what a forward-thinking, action-oriented Church should be doing.

Until people begin to realise what this will mean – as we have in Morningside where five churches became one over sixty years.

Until people begin to realise what the impact will be on those who will be seeking their first Church, after years of training.

Blue-sky thinking has feet on the ground implications for real people, and real buildings.

Ascension Sunday. It is not difficult to imagine the disciples’ feelings after their tumultuous three years with Jesus, and the preceding forty days that had included Palm Sunday, and Maundy Thursday, and the crucifixion on Good Friday, and the numbing emptiness of Holy Saturday, and the euphoric confusion of Easter. Jesus was going. And gone. They were left wondering and waiting, sort of trusting that the Spirit would come but not certain when, or how. Speculating when Jesus might drop down from the clouds and sort it all out for them. The followers of Jesus found themselves in that uncomfortable space we know as ‘between’.ⁱ

Is that where we are? In the midst of uncertainty and expectation. We crave resolution and desperately want to turn the page to the next chapter, but here, on Ascension Sunday, and it may be for some time ahead, we dwell with the disciples in the 'between' space. And if that is relatively comfortable for some, it will not be for all. So we bring our eyes back down to earth and go to help, and offer support, and sit with, and comfort, and feet, and listen, and wait, wait, wait. With one eye fixed on heaven, and the reminder of God's promised strength. And one eye fixed on earth, and the reminder that there are needs here and now that we can and must meet.

A prayer commonly attributed to Teresa of Avila speaks to us of Ascension-tide: Christ in heaven, but Christ present, in us, on earth:

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.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Jefferson D Peterson-Davis, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2 p506