

God has gone up*Psalm 47; Acts 1:1-11*

It is an unusual feature of our Church, hidden in plain sight, that in the south transept we have two stained glass windows. One depicting the crucifixion of Jesus. If it's windy outside the trees in next door's garden blow about and it makes it look as if the flags in the window are moving. That's the left-hand window. On the right-hand side there is a depiction not of the resurrection, which some might expect, but the Ascension. Jesus is caught in the action of moving up into heaven, with everyone standing around, looking upwards.

It sets our eyes on heaven and the second coming of Jesus. It's one of those 'bridging' moments in the Bible. Jesus' earthly ministry is over. He is moving on. His disciples do not understand what is happening and are not ready to let Him go, but He is going. Clouds cover Him, and He is gone. Like His disciples, so we in our Church look up at this window, and the question asked by the two men in white robes about why are the disciples standing around, and looking into heaven applies to us. Why do we, looking up at this Ascension window, stand around looking to the heavens?

Ascension is one of those difficult stories in the Bible. In a world laden with scientific logic and evidence-based knowledge, what are we supposed to make of the Ascension story? Only Luke, at the end of his gospel and the beginning of his sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the emerging early church, makes mention of it.

It is not as is usual with these difficult stories going to be helpful to try and work out the mechanics of Ascension. Something happened on the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem. The resurrection appearances of Jesus came to an end forty days after His rising from the dead.

This is a story not just about waiting, stargazing into heaven. This is a story about preparation, and action. The apostles must get on with their witness *to* and *work* for Jesus now, on earth, until He comes back. It was the earth, not the sky, that was to be their preoccupation.ⁱ

For the disciples the period between Easter and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as a significant pause. A pause between the mighty acts of God, a pause in which the Church's task was to wait and pray for the coming of God's Holy Spirit. The waiting was not empty-handed. Those first Christians waited in hope. The Jesus they knew on earth, Who served, taught and loved them now rules in heaven as the Christ. This belief demands witness. Christians then, and now, are called to do something about this. The angels chivvy things along: *"Why do you stand looking into heaven?"* There is work to be done; let the Church be about the work in the meantime, secure in the promise that Jesus Who was so dramatically taken from His disciples will return to them at some point in the future.ⁱⁱ

Not only a challenge for those first apostles, but a challenge to us today as we, in this time, seek to continue that work. There is work to be done in the meantime. And yes, we are older, and yes, we may be tired, and yes, resources may be tight, and yes, we might not get much help from other church bodies. But we are here, and we know what we can do here, and we can begin to imagine again, as we have done before, what we might try next. Sometimes it is simply keeping the show on the road. Sometimes it is trying something new and different. Sometimes it is rediscovering forgotten things, or things we've never known from the past. Sometimes it is opening our arms wide and embracing a future that we can barely begin to imagine.

Is it the case that for Christians today, weary, incomplete, inconsistent and timid as we often are, it will not simply be the knowing about Jesus but rather believing we have been blessed by God to use His power which will enable us to succeed as people who will be *doing* the work of Jesus?

We need our minds to think, and our hearts to feel, but we also need our bodies to be doing something about what we believe. In this meantime, as we wait proactively, and go about the business of God's Kingdom, when God, in Jesus, as gone up into heaven.

When the world falls apart, when things come loose, when chaos threatens, it is good to know that God is still in charge of heaven and earth, through giving us power to work with Him. God has gone up, not gone away, from the Church, but gone up to send down the Holy Spirit Who will give us the courage to face up to what is going in and around our lives right now. Jesus has been raised up into the hope of God's Kingdom, which is here and now.

Here then is the promise of Jesus to ensure that we are not left helpless and hopeless. We may be dazzled for a moment by the poetry and artistry of the Ascension, but not for so long that we forget the world that surrounds us. God has moved on, and so must we. We see Christ in glory in the heavens at the same time as we see the desperate needs of our sisters and brothers here on the earth. Positioned between these two, we call out for help and strength and then use it to bring what we can to transform the lives around us.

Lives that are struggling with numbing or tearing pain; lives that are struggling with bitter bereavement; lives that have lost their direction and their mojo; lives that are bent double with responsibility at work or at home, in the community and in the church; lives that are fearful, or resentful; or over-confident; or anxious. Positioned between heaven and earth, we wait actively and become conduits, if we would but know it, of God's power, Jesus' power, the Spirit's power flowing through us and finding the strength and the perseverance to help and keep on helping.

In recent days I have visited two very old ladies, not members of our congregation, both coming to the end of their lives. One still able to whisper that she was at peace and thankful for the care and love she had known, and that she was ready to go. The other, still bright as a button but

knowing her death was not far off, wanted to know how to get ready. Should she make peace with her annoying little sister who had been annoying her for 80 years? Should she plan her hymns and readings for her funeral? Should she still let grandchildren and great grandchildren see her in these last days (yes, she should if they want to see her!) Should she stop eating and restrict what she was drinking? Should she take more painkillers as they were offered? And what should she do in the long, empty nights when she couldn't sleep. We remembered the old Sunday School song, 'Count your blessings, name them one by one.' She said, 'That's even better than counting sheep when I can't sleep.' And we go her started, and one memory spilled out after another. As she lay between life and death, between earth and heaven, in the waiting time, she found that her fear about dying was reducing as she started counting blessings. People, special times, places. She had come from no church membership, but found comfort in a basic faith in her time of greatest need.

For those who have struggled with the absence or distance of Jesus in their lives, or never really having known Him, this Ascension story demands that we consider the tremendous faith required of us throughout life, and maybe most in the face of death. When God seems distant or veiled. By thinking of the time when Jesus left, can we understand that we need resources found in community with others and through the Spirit? The absence of the earthly Jesus leads us to search for a God Who is nevertheless present in our world.

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you."ⁱⁱⁱ Gaze into heaven if you must. Know that there will be absence in your life. But realise that very absence is creating space, creating room in your life to let the Spirit of God in. And just when you can't face it, or stand it, or bear it anymore, whatever that 'it' might be, open your heart, your mind, your body, your soul, and pray the old prayer, *Veni Creator Spiritus*: Come, Creator Spirit.

And into my emptiness, and fearfulness, and hunger, fill me with good things, to the brim. Bread and wine today are but symbols of what God's Spirit is longing to share with you. Right now.

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

Amen

ⁱ John R W Stott, *The Message of Acts*, pps50-51

ⁱⁱ William H Willimon, *Acts*, p20

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 7:7