

## Launching out

Acts 1:6-14

Earlier this week – Thursday to be precise – I looked at the calendar and thought – May! Almost at the longest day. Then we'll be heading back to Christmas<sup>1</sup>.

And then I realised it was Ascension Day, and *then* I realised<sup>2</sup> something that probably everyone else has always noticed and had just passed me by. The church's calendar is arranged so that, starting from December we have six months (Advent to Ascension) when we think about Jesus' ministry on earth (incarnation), followed by six months where we are challenged to put into practice what we have seen Jesus doing.

And today is the cusp – that balancing point between Ascension (Jesus' return to heaven) and Pentecost (the coming of the Holy Spirit, when the practical stuff begins.)

A time to stop. And wait. And reflect on what comes next.

In our NT reading this morning we revisited the Mount of Olives with Jesus and the 11 remaining disciples. Since Easter Day Jesus has met, and eaten, with them several times, rooting all that they have seen and experienced in the words of the OT scriptures. And he has pointed forwards to the next chapter, where "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations", as Luke puts it<sup>3</sup>, and reminded them of the promise of the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if the disciples have an inkling that this might be the conclusion of Jesus time on earth? There's something about the text which kind of suggests that perhaps they do. But when they reach Bethany there's still time for one last question which they have been burning to ask him. One question which shows that over the past three years they have come a long, long way from the fishing nets, tax collector's booth, and other assorted places from where Jesus called them, but yet still haven't quite grasped the full picture.

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<sup>1</sup> Forgive me. It was very early in the morning, and that's when I most notice the length of the day!

<sup>2</sup> That's a lot of realising for so early in the morning

<sup>3</sup> Luke 24:47

“Jesus, is this the time when **you** will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

And Jesus gives them two answers

Firstly – all that will happen in God’s good time, and it’s not for anyone other than God to say when that will be

And secondly – **you** will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and **you** will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

It’s as if Jesus is saying – “God will do God’s bit. I have done what I came to do. Don’t worry about either of those things. Focus on what you are called to do. Now it is time for you to put all you have seen and heard and practised and learnt into practice, so that my message is taken all over the world.

“And yes, you **can** do it, because you will have my Spirit working in you. So the first thing you have to do is wait...

Wait for the Spirit, who will come to guide you, empower you and equip you

Wait for the Spirit of Truth, who will guide you into all truth

Wait for the Spirit, who will assure you that you are mine and reassure you when times get tough

Wait....

Because you will receive the power to do this when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.”

Then they see the boundary between earth and heaven briefly melt away and they witness Jesus returning to the full presence of the living God, having completed the work he came to do. And as they gaze in wonder, two of the citizens of heaven reassure them that the work they have been given to do will not be in vain - that Jesus *will* come again. And then the moment is passed and they are alone on the Mount of Olives once again.

And I guess it’s not surprising that they return to their room upstairs, their “safe place”, as they take on board the task they have just been given. Nor, maybe, is it surprising that they do what many of us do when we feel completely out of our depth – they turn to fervent prayer. And through that prayer, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, they were changed - into people who in turn helped to change the course of human history.

I wonder how we view this story of the disciples? It’s all so long, long ago and far, far away – how can it possibly mean anything for us today?

Well, just maybe, because it **is** all so long, long ago and far, far away. For this group of 11 wobbly men, and the women and other friends who were gathered with them, told others about God's love in Jesus, and they told others, and they told others – down the centuries and across the globe, until today, we are the inheritors of their prayer and the power of the Spirit at work in their lives.

We are inheritors - and implementers. We hold this precious gift of the truth of God's love and welcome, his healing and forgiveness, to make a difference today. To care for those in need, to challenge injustice, to care for creation.

We are inheritors – and stewards. We hold this precious gift of the truth of God's love and welcome, his healing and forgiveness not only for this generation, but also in trust for future generations. We hold it, to pass it on to others.

We are inheritors – and imitators? Let's never forget that these were just ordinary human beings like you and me. They did ordinary jobs, lived ordinary lives, were nothing particularly special. But they saw someone special in Jesus, and made the life-changing decision to follow him.

For them, that meant upping sticks and getting on the road with him. For us, it almost certainly means staying where we are, but being equally serious and committed to following him. It means learning from him through the scriptures. It means getting to know him through prayer. It means doing what he asks us to do – even when it's difficult and we feel out of our depth. It means serving others. It means receiving from God and giving back to God. Sometimes it means not talking to our friends because someone new needs our attention; sometimes it means questioning long-held views and being ready to see things through God's eyes. It means allowing our hearts as well as our behaviours to be changed so they are more like those of Jesus. More loving. More forgiving. More generous. More merciful. Less about "me," and more about others.

Being a disciple is about allowing ourselves to be changed. By following Jesus' example, and by allowing his Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

And if this seems impossibly daunting, then we need to remember two things

Firstly - the disciples did it together. Jesus had 12 close disciples, of whom three were especially close. And we also hear of other groups who followed him – “the women”, the 70, the 500. I’m tempted to say that the only time we hear of a disciple acting on their own – Judas, Thomas – they were getting things badly wrong. To be honest I can’t see how Christian faith can ever be “a private matter” – Jesus calls us as individuals, but into relationship with him **and** his body- the community which we call ‘the church’. Because it’s hard - and we all need support, and encouragement, and (occasionally) to be challenged. ‘Disciples’ is plural – we follow together.

And secondly – we never, ever do it in human strength. “You will *receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,*” said Jesus. No – we do not see the physical Jesus, like his first disciples did. Instead we have his Spirit residing within us. (And you can’t get much closer than that!) And the more we open ourselves to being changed – transformed – by the Spirit, the more we will experience the Spirit’s power in our lives and actions.

So – that’s the challenge, as we sit here “on the cusp” between Ascension and Pentecost.

Where are you on this journey of following Jesus?

Maybe you’re right at the beginning – not even sure if there is a God. If so, you are welcome. Please stay with us, walk with us, ask us questions, experience the love and forgiveness which we believe comes from God for yourself.

Maybe you know about God through the regular rhythm of church life, and the belonging and comfort you experience. If so, that is wonderful, and we pray that you will want to experience more and more of God, and respond to his call.

Maybe you are hearing Jesus’ prompting to “come and follow me”. Please do. It is the mostly costly, but the most fulfilling, decision you will ever make.

We started by thinking about this being the season where we switch from focussing on Jesus’ life and work, to how we are going to take it forward.

In the northern hemisphere this fits in really well with the rhythm of the seasons. Across the country, we see birds making nests and laying eggs. And

the young are hatching, being nurtured, growing – and eventually fledging. Taking flight, leaving the nest, and preparing for whatever life will bring.

Over the past six months we have been reminded of how the disciples were “hatched” into new life with Jesus, how they were fed, watered, taught, protected, healed and set right by him. Now they are about to leave the nest, and in the power of the Spirit, to launch out into what they are called to do.

We too are invited. Are we ready to take to our wings too?