

Ascension Day

Acts 1:1-11; Daniel 7:9-14; Luke 24:44-end

Do you recall the time before catch up TV and all that. The time when you watched one episode of a drama series on TV then had to wait with baited breath for the next week when the next episode was shown.

And when the next Thursday evening (or whatever it was) came round you saw a few scenes which summarized what had happened before. A recap if you like to link the episodes together.

I think in one way that's what's happening here with our readings from Acts and the gospel of Luke. Luke wrote two volumes – the first - his gospel – was the story of Jesus's birth, life & teaching and death and resurrection. The second was the story of the early church – in Acts (the Acts of the Apostles). And the story we read today from both Acts and Luke is the one that links them together. The story of what we call the ascension.

The gospel ends with an account of the ascension, and Acts begins with – a recap of how the previous episode finished as we read about Jesus' ascension.

And Today is ascension day when we remember this event in the church's year. 40 days after Easter; 10 days before Pentecost.

It is a strange story. Jesus being taken up into heaven, the presence of the cloud, the appearance of the men in white robes. It's an example of the huge difficulty of trying to explain in human language the mysteries of God's dealings with the world – of God breaking into the world. It stretches the meaning and interpretation of language to its very limits, and is still found wanting.

So what is going on here? What did happen and what does it mean for us today?

I think that perhaps some of this confusion and mystery is caused by our wrong understanding of heaven.

We often think of heaven as where we go when we die, our eternal home if you like. And mostly it's thought of as some kind of spiritual realm, in opposition to the physical world in which we live. Heaven, we think, is for what all this – all this physical stuff all around us that we call earth – is merely a preparation.

Think this way and it doesn't take long to disregard all the difficulties and trials and injustices and pain and suffering and joys and pleasures and everything else of this world. It doesn't take long before we begin to believe and live as if this world doesn't matter. The only important thing is 'where we go when we die'. And there are certainly strands of the Christian Church that hold to that view of things. What matters is whether you are 'saved'; whether you are going to heaven.

And if the spiritual is the only ultimate reality, the physical becomes temporary and unimportant. But surely we know that isn't true. Our own experience tells us that what goes on around us – in our lives, in the lives of our loved ones and of others – is vital; is all important.

And clearly this is what is reflected in Jesus' own life and teaching and example. It was clear that this world was important, vitally important to him. Virtually the whole of his teaching is about this world. How we treat people, how to show love, how to live, the importance of the outcast and the marginalized, the centrality of a justice which reflects this life and its concerns.

He actually has very little to say about what happens when we die.

And St Paul, in his analysis of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 makes it quite clear that his understanding – based on a Christian interpretation of Jewish thought – is that resurrection is more than anything physical. It's about God renewing this earth. It's not about a hazy spiritual existence in another realm. Our resurrection bodies will be physical bodies, but physical in some much more complete way to what we are used to.

So perhaps we need to think again about heaven. Just what is heaven? How should we understand it?

The bible presents heaven and earth (and I use the term earth to refer to the current physical world) as two parts of God's creation. But not two separate realms with earth 'down here' and heaven 'up there' in some mystical spiritual way. More like two aspects of the reality of one creation. God's space, and our space if you like. Which kind of reflects the occasional points in scripture where heaven and earth intersect – eg Moses, Elijah, the birth and the baptism of Jesus and the reading from Daniel

God's plan, again as revealed throughout scripture, is for a new heaven and new earth – as for example in Revelation – and that renewal will join them together for eternity.

And maybe its our misunderstanding of the nature of heaven – our assumption that this ultimate reality is not physical – that means that we find it hard to make any sense of the mystery of Jesus’ resurrection appearances - where Jesus seems both physical and more than physical, able to both eat as we do, and yet walk through locked doors.

Jesus’ resurrection marks the point where we see a foretaste of this renewal; this joining together of our space and God’s space. . His resurrection body is at home in both our space and God’s space. It’s an anticipation of when everything will be renewed and joined together.

And this understanding then sheds light on the ascension. Where Jesus is taken in a cloud – that familiar sign of God’s presence - and returns to the God space; leaves our space not forever, but until the day when earth and heaven are renewed in the new creation.

Which brings me to the other point. What does it mean for us?
Why did this happen?

Why did he have to leave this space?

Why, after 40 days of resurrection appearances, did they have to come to an end?

Why did the foretaste of the end times only last for little over a month?

And the answer there is again something of a mystery.

God’s plan is that we – ordinary people like you and me – take on the mantle of proclaiming the truth about God, about his purposes and his direction for the world. Proclaim by word and deed what Jesus has been doing.

But the promise is that we won’t be left alone – the promise is that God through his Spirit will be with us. Each one of us. We will each have the Spirit of Jesus inside of us.

See the difference here.

There is a move from Jesus – even the resurrected Jesus – being followed by the disciples and others in proclaiming the truth by word and deed - to a situation where initially tens, then hundreds, then thousands, tens of thousands and now millions of us, all inspired by God, all with his Spirit in us can proclaim the same truth. Can live the same way. Can point people to God in the same way. Can teach people the truth about life now and the resurrection life to come.

And when we think of things that way we can see why the Ascension is so important.

People often call Pentecost – when we celebrate the coming of the Spirit – the birthday of the Church. It could also be argued that the church was born at the Ascension. When Jesus left his disciples, and by extension us, to carry on his work. When the promise was made, that the Holy Spirit would come, that promise to be fulfilled just 10 days later.

Which is why, I believe, we need to take note of this day. The disciples went back home and waited for God's Spirit to come. While they waited they prayed. They prayed for the coming of the transforming, enriching, powerful Holy Spirit which would enable them to do his will, to proclaim his truth by word and deed, and to live for him in the world.

And we know from a quick glance at the world around us that we need people - people like us - to live those kinds of lives ; lives inspired by the love, peace and justice of Jesus and empowered by the spirit of Jesus.

Lives in which the Spirit enables us each to become one more person to be added to those millions through the ages who have carried on and will continue to carry on the work of Jesus in proclaiming the gospel of love and peace, and in transforming the world in which we live