Sermon for 7th of Easter Year A

Readings: Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

i

On Thursday last we celebrated Ascension Day. Or rather, we should have celebrated, but this particular Christian festival is frequently overlooked among Protestant churches. Yet the Ascension is an important part of the Jesus story; like pearls on a string, the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension belong together.

The ascension is followed by the pearls of Pentecost and ultimately, the Second Coming. Each pearl has its place in the string. Cut the string and you risk losing the lot.

The ascension is the essential step between the resurrection and the age of the Church in which we currently live. It declares the absolute and eternal approval of God the Father for what Jesus has done – and we see in this ascension narrative how Jesus has once again been accorded the title, “Lord”. Our gospel passage from John also tells us that Jesus has been given authority “over all people” (John 17:2).

There are parallels in the pagan world at this time. Roman emperors were deemed to have become divine upon someone claiming to have seen them rise to heaven. But there is a significant difference: Jesus is a crucified carpenter, not a militaristic dictator who is hoping to exercise the same sort of power in death as he had in life.

Our passage opens with a question about whether Jesus is about to “restore the kingdom to Israel” (v6). It is not certain whether this is a sign that many still did not understand the nature of the kingdom Jesus had proclaimed, or is just a foil for Luke’s explanation about the so-called delay in the Second Coming and the inauguration of the age of the Church.

The ascension removes all doubt. Jesus has not restored the old Davidic empire and ascended to King David’s earthly throne as a triumphant Messiah, but has ascended to the heavenly throne as leader of a world-wide kingdom that must be proclaimed “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Luke will be aware that some Christian groups, such as a few at Thessalonica, have decided to give up work, live off the benevolence of the Church and wait for the Second Coming. Luke will also know of the teaching in several of Jesus’ parables that “the Son of Man will come at a time you do not expect him” (Luke12:40).

So Luke includes here another warning to all those over-zealous apocalyptic doom-mongers that seem to pop up every few months predicting the imminent end of the world – shut up! You do not know the times or dates, you are not supposed to know (Acts 1:7).

Two angels appear as Jesus is removed from their sight – reminding us of the two angels that appeared at the empty tomb in Luke 24:4. The angels’ job seems to be directing the followers of Jesus from looking in the wrong places and pointing to where Jesus can be found. He is not mouldering in any dark tomb, nor is he far above, out of sight and out of reach in heaven, but is about to be with us still through the power of the Holy Spirit that the departing Jesus has promised.

We could all do with such angelic ministrations from time to time. How frequently we still find ourselves looking for Jesus in places where he can no longer be found. There are certain places that Jesus has promised to always be found by those who seek. These include the bread and wine of the sacrament, the fellowship of the Church, and what John Wesley described as the “means of grace”. But we need to distinguish between those eternal touchstones of our spiritual lives and the ossifying effects of routine and ‘the way we have always done it’ mentality that so often afflicts us.

The ascension story, like that of the walk to Emmaus, or Jesus’ refusal of Peter’s offer to build tabernacles on the Mount of Transfiguration, tells us that being a follower of Jesus is about moving on, keeping up and embracing the future face-on with courage and hope, because the future is already secure in God’s hand, ready to be revealed at God’s discretion. The final pearl on the string is ready to be added. We have to continue to get on with our role in our time and place and leave the future to God.

ii

The passage from *First Letter of Peter* addresses the apparent contradiction that following a triumphant Christ who has ascended to God’s right hand does not inaugurate a victory parade for those who follow him, but a path of suffering.

The passage speaks of “painful trials” and explains that this should not take Christians by surprise, or be considered unusual because it is the fate of Christians ”throughout the world” and this is exactly the path of suffering love espoused by Jesus himself.

I write these words on the day we have heard about the murder at the hands of a young terrorist of Fr Jacques Hamel during Mass at his country church in Normandy.

However, besides such egregious examples of Christian suffering, there is the less dramatic, but constant background accompaniment of Christian – ‘suffering’ is too strong a word for this – but what I shall describe as Christian ‘discomfort’.

By this term, I mean to refer to that sense of displacement, disappointment and discomfort we often experience when we realise how differently we view the nature and meaning of life compared to the ways of the world. By believing in Christ as ascended Lord and the source of all ultimate truth and power, we put ourselves at odds with the world in which we live. We are always slightly and sometimes alarmingly out of step. Assumptions people make about the world, our best interests and the best way ahead are so often ill-suited to our spiritual inclinations.

Yet I reflect that Christians are far from being the only people ill at ease with much of the way the world works.

Many, many people around the globe display behaviour that suggests they are fearful of or dissatisfied by how the world is. Consider the tidal wave of migrants, not all from war-torn hell holes, who are so fed up with home that any risk will be taken to escape; consider all those who dull the crappiness of their everyday lives through drugs and alcohol; consider those who retreat from reality and live in a virtual world of internet games and alternative realities they have created on-line; consider the pent-up anger and alienation sweeping across the political world from those who support Trump, Sanders, Brexit, Jeremy Corbyn, Podermos, Alternative fur Deutschland, Geert Wilders, Marianne Le Pen and so on.

Life is pretty gritty, unsatisfactory and alienating for many people besides Christians. Perhaps we should not feel sorry for ourselves, but embrace the fact that suffering for Christ at least has a purpose and redemptive value.

iii

The ascension of Christ also assures us that ultimately the values of Jesus Christ shall prevail, however unlikely that may appear from time to time in the course of history. There is a fine line perhaps, between offensive triumphalism and resolute Christian faith, but holding on to the cosmic Lordship of Christ when the world around us is falling apart is one of the blessings of faith.

1 Peter 4 & 5 may tell us to hold on through suffering because as followers of Christ we should expect it, but the passage also assures us those who endure “shall be lifted up by God’s almighty hand in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

I trust that such a confidence in the ultimate triumph of love, peace and gentleness which the ascension of Christ represents will act as a restraint on Christian hearts in the aftermath of terrorist murders such as we have just witnessed in Normandy.

The secular world derides such quaint Christian notions as the ascension; to them we are embracing myth as reality, but I would argue that to believe in the ultimate, unassailable victory of love, peace and gentleness is precisely what reality could do with right now.

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