

# The Ascension ...

*... bringing heaven and earth together*

---

*A sermon given on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, 21st May 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Acts 1:6-14*

Have you ever noticed how some of the best stories involve taking someone from their particular world and dropping them into a different world? Think of Peter Pan taking Wendy and the Darling children from their comfortable Edwardian nursery to Never Neverland; think of the Pevensie children tumbling through the back of the wardrobe into Narnia; think of a number of Shakespeare plays where noblemen and princes get shipwrecked on mysterious islands and no one knows who they are; think of *The Prince and the Pauper*, where two worlds get swapped over - the Prince has to get used to living in the slums, and the Pauper has to get used to life in the palace; think of any number of TV documentaries where people swap homes or swap teenage children, or where Michael Portillo has to live for a month on benefits, or where Jeremy Clarkson discovers he has no gift for farming. When you start to notice it, these narratives are all over the place. Science fiction provides an entire genre dedicated to putting people, quite literally, into new and unexplored worlds. And I guess the reason these narratives are so popular is because when people are exposed to a new and unfamiliar world, they learn things not just about their new setting, but also about themselves. The world's richest man, Jeff Bezos, seems to be quite keen on turning science fiction into science fact. This week, he's won a contract with NASA, worth over three and a half billion dollars to run a mission to the moon as the first step in getting to Mars. And Jeff Bezos isn't alone. Elon Musk, the owner of Twitter, signed his contract with NASA a couple of years ago. Richard Branson has a company dedicated to developing space tourism, and other billionaires have been investing in satellite systems and space telescopes. There seems to be something about having a lot of money that makes you want to explore new worlds.

And I wonder, what about you? (I'm not suggesting there are any billionaires present, or at least if you are, you could do something worthwhile closer to home.) But how willing would you be to change places with someone from a very different background? How ready would you be to learn something about yourself by being immersed in a different world?

It's not an entirely academic question, because something like that is required of us in the journey of faith. The journey of Christian conversion opens us up to the possibility of being

changed and of becoming better versions of ourselves because of our exposure to the kingdom of God.

Today is the Sunday after Ascension Day, when Jesus can look a bit like a character in early science fiction, taking off into the sky like a rocket: as the first reading puts it, 'He was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.' But I think that risks misleading us. Jesus isn't off on a journey to explore new worlds and seek new experiences. He hasn't got bored with planet Earth and decided to expand his horizons. The idea is not that he's leaving one world for another, but that he's actually bringing two worlds together. As Jesus ascends into the heavens, he goes not as a disembodied soul or spirit, he goes with his human body still bearing the scars in his hands and side, he takes our humanity into the presence of God, crucified and resurrected. The Ascension isn't about Jesus escaping from this world, but about Him bringing Heaven and Earth together under his Lordship. And that doesn't require anyone to travel anywhere. It requires us to notice that the kingdom of God is within us and to respond accordingly. And if we ask the question, what is Jesus doing now in Heaven? Part of the answer is that he's preparing a human-shaped space for us in the presence of God. He's taking our humanity into the heart of God, our humanity with all its suffering and brokenness, but also expanding us into our image of God.

So when the disciples ask, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel", they are misunderstanding. They're thinking in earthly terms as if the way to get things done is through imposing the king's will; the way of power, of competition, of rivalry; of self assertion; of grasping the advantage; of getting ahead of the others; and of judging others and putting them down. In asking if Jesus is going to restore the kingdom to Israel, they are thinking of the kingdom of this earth; they're thinking in terms of earthly power.

But the way of God's kingdom is the way of grace, of compassion and mercy and generosity and hope, the way of allowing one another space to grow into the likeness of Christ. And what Jesus's ascension tells us is that this way of grace isn't just some kind of religious experience, but it's the final destiny of all God's creation; that the way of the world will finally yield to the way of grace. Because Christ is risen and ascended victorious over those life-denying powers of selfishness and sin and death that try to limit our humanity and put up boundaries and say we can only give so much of ourselves and no more. As we bow our knees before him, as we confess him to be our Lord and as we do our best to live as citizens of Heaven here on Earth, so that way of generosity and forgiveness and hope will enlarge us and take shape in the life of our community. That's the whole point of the church - to show that the peace and righteousness and mercy of God aren't just words, but that they take shape in concrete ways in the life of real communities.

Jesus has entered our world as one of us so that we can enter his. The Son of God became the Son of Mary so that the children of men and women might become the children of God. And as we respond to the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ, so we discover new dimensions to our own lives, new possibilities, new opportunities and challenges. And by allowing ourselves to be open to God's kingdom, our lives can be transcended. We discover there is more to us than we thought. We can be surprised into growth and we can better play our part in making the kingdom of heaven a reality here on earth.

# Reading Text

## Acts 1:6-14

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' 7 He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.' 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.