

Jesus Ascended ...

... and the disciples rejoiced

A sermon given on the Sunday after Ascension, 12th May 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Luke 24:44-end

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, the third of the three great festivals marking key moments in Jesus's earthly ministry. We have Christmas that marks Jesus's birth, with the Son of God becoming the Son of Mary and one of us; we have Easter, marking Jesus's death and resurrection and the triumph of God's faithfulness and love over death itself; and we have Ascension Day, marking the end of Jesus's time on Earth and his return to heaven to be seated at the right-hand of the Father in glory. On Ascension Day, Jesus completes the work he began - but in some ways, it's a difficult festival to get into: on the one hand, it's a moment of triumph and completion as Jesus successfully ends his earthly mission; on the other hand, it can feel like a bit of an anti-climax - Jesus has been and gone, so what's changed? Here we are still, and the world doesn't seem to recognise God's authority anymore now than it did before the incarnation. This is where Luke's account of the ascension may help - his description of the disciple's reaction is a little bit surprising.

You would have thought that Jesus withdrawing from the disciples and going into heaven would have left them sad: they weren't going to see him again; his time with them was over; they were now on their own and left to get on with it. But Jesus says they returned to Jerusalem with great joy; they were continually in the temple blessing God. Why were the disciples joyful at having apparently just said goodbye to Jesus? Luke gives us at least three reasons.

First of all, he points out that the disciples were witnesses of the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus confirms and completes that victory. Christ has been revealed as the saviour, triumphant over death. The disciples can rejoice that their faith in him, seriously tested on Good Friday, was not in the end misplaced. And so the ascension is a sign of hope, not only that death has been defeated, but that there is a future in heaven - where Jesus leads, there his disciples can follow. As the collect for Ascension Day puts it, 'As we believe your only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to have ascended into the heavens, so we, in heart and mind, may also ascend and with him continually dwell.' So there is cause for rejoicing, not just for the first disciples, but also for you and me. Jesus's ascension means that whatever trials we may face, whatever hardships and struggles, whatever disappointments and reversals, whatever failures and fallings, God is faithful, and nothing can separate us from his love. When we look at the world around us and we see how in many ways things seem to be going backwards: war between nations that were previously peaceful; stalling economies where there was growing prosperity; the erosion of freedoms and rights we had thought we could take for granted. Despite all of that, Christ is triumphant, and his reign in heaven will one day be reflected here on Earth. So we too, rejoice because the ascension is a mark of Christ's victory.

Secondly, the first disciples were also joyful because they had the promise of the Holy spirit. Stay here in the says Jesus, until you have been clothed with power from on high. Next Sunday, we'll be celebrating Pentecost and the giving of the Holy spirit when that promise was fulfilled.

So the disciples were able to rejoice because they weren't being left as orphans. The Holy spirit is the spirit of Jesus himself, and so he was still going to be with them, but in a different way. As Jesus says as in John's gospel, *"It is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the advocate [that is the Holy Spirit] will not come to you."* And that's also a good reason for you and me to rejoice as well: because Jesus is ascended, his presence isn't limited to a handful of Galilean fishermen in first century Judea; instead, the Spirit of Jesus has been poured out on followers of Jesus in every land and in every century ever since. We experience him not superficially and externally with our eyes and ears alone, but deeply and transformatively in our hearts. When we see the disciples responding to Jesus in the Gospels, they may see him and hear him, but most of the time they don't understand him. But followers of Jesus since Pentecost have been temples of the Holy Spirit, hosting the presence of God in their own souls. So because of the ascension, the Spirit of Jesus has come, and we rejoice because we know we are not alone.

And thirdly and finally, we rejoice because Jesus hasn't left us twiddling our thumbs and wondering what comes next. The ascension means that the followers of Jesus have to grow up. We no longer look to him to do everything for us. Instead, we have to take responsibility for continuing his work. We've been given a job to do, proclaiming repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name. The first disciples were direct witnesses of the resurrection and ascension. They saw it with their own eyes. But you and I can be witnesses with our own lives if we have experienced and responded to the grace of God.

It's a powerful thing to believe that God knows you through and through and yet still loves you overwhelmingly and unconditionally; it's a powerful thing to discover that life makes much more sense trusting, serving, and responding to our risen and ascended Lord, rather than trying to shape the rest of the universe around our own hungry and needy egos; it's a powerful thing to speak of God's mercy and grace and to share the promise of the gospel, and to see other people's eyes open wide at the mere possibility of their being a God who loves them.

At the Ascension, Jesus withdraws and is carried back to heaven. But the disciples rejoice. And so do we, because Christ is triumphant and ever reigning, because the Holy spirit is coming and we are not left alone, and because we have been entrusted with the amazing, powerful, and life-changing message of the gospel itself.

So let's ponder these truths; reflect on them; open your hearts and minds to them - and rejoice.

Reading Text

Luke 24:44-end

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.'

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' ⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.