

**Sermon May 16<sup>th</sup> 2021, Sunday after Ascension, by Andrew Watts LLM**  
**Epistle: Acts 1: 1-11: Gospel: John 16: 12 – 15**

## **I Luke's accounts**

Ascension Day this year was on Thursday this past week. As you know several countries still have a public holiday on Ascension Day. Angela's school in Kent in the 1950s had a day's holiday for Ascension Day. So, have we as the church in England lost a sense of the importance of Ascension Day?

As we come to the end of this Easter season, I suggest, if you haven't done it before, that you read the stories of the crucifixion and resurrection at the end of Luke's gospel. And then go straight on to the beginning of the book of Acts. In those chapters, in Luke's wonderfully spare and matter-of-fact style, we can see how the narrative drives on. Right at the end of his Gospel, in three short verses, Luke refers to the Ascension: "While He was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven." Luke's narrative comes back to that event at the start of the book of Acts. There Luke tells of the "many convincing proofs that Jesus was alive" (v.3) and Jesus's promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit (v.5). Then again the story of how Jesus was "taken up before their very eyes" (v.9) and a message was left by "two men dressed in white"(v.10). The disciples walk back to Jerusalem, because what happened was on the Mount of Olives. And they "returned with great joy, and they stayed continually at the temple, praising God". Those are the very last verses of Luke's gospel. (Luke 24 v. 52-53). From the crucifixion, to the resurrection, to the Ascension and then on to Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit in chapter two of Acts. The early church saw each event as rising out of the earlier ones.

## **II An event in time and space**

Because of the way that artists have portrayed the Ascension we are inclined to see it as a spectacular event. In contrast the way Luke describes it – it was as though it was ordinary: "He left them"(Luke 24:51), "He was taken up ... and a cloud hid him from their sight" (Acts 1v.9). It was first of all an event in time and space which the disciples could SEE. But the early church saw it as highly significant and they came to make a great deal of it. The gospels recorded that whenever Jesus had spoken of His death He also referred to his glory and, by implication, to his Ascension. On the Mount of

Transfiguration the two heavenly beings, Moses and Elijah, who met Jesus there “spoke [with Him] about His departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem” (Luke chapter 9, v. 31.)

We tend to think of the Ascension as a departure. Because we can relate to the idea of a saying good bye to a friend, and even empathise with the people who were realising that they were no more going to see His physical form on earth. The disciples were still in a confused state and we feel that we are totally with them when we read that they remained “looking intently up”. And we can imagine their reactions when two men dressed in white asked “Why do you stand here looking into the sky” (Acts 1 V. 11). But again that hints at a deeper meaning. It is perhaps a deliberate echo of the question to the women by the empty tomb, from two other men “in clothes that gleamed like lightning”: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (Luke 24 v. 4-5).

### **III An event out of time**

The appearances of two men in dazzling white clothes would have reminded a devout Jewish person of a passage in the Book of Daniel when the prophet is given a vision into heaven. A majestic figure, called ‘the Ancient of Days’ is there being worshipped by ten thousand times ten thousand (Dan. 7. 10). His clothing was white as snow (v. 9). And the prophet described how “in my vision at night I looked and there before me was one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence” (v. 13). And the early church applied this prophecy to the departure of Jesus from the earth and they realised this was the explanation Jesus had given of where He was going. Not surprisingly, because Jesus had often used that phrase about Himself, “the Son of Man”.

### **IV The mood of the disciples: why rejoicing? No bereavement?**

The moods of the disciples might be described as a roller-coaster. Peter left the empty tomb in the garden “wondering what had happened” (Luke 24: v. 12). The disciples were ‘Startled’, ‘frightened’ ‘troubled’, and ‘doubting’. (Luke 24 37-38). Later they were filled with Joy and amazement (v.41).

It is not surprising that the early church made so much of this event and that the church has seen so much to celebrate in what it means to our

faith. It is as though the Ascension, and Jesus entry into heaven, was the fulfilment of His work for humankind.

When Peter gave his first sermon to the people of Jerusalem, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, he focused on the Ascension of Jesus (Acts 2). He quoted two OT passages that were enormously important to the early church. Firstly, Psalm 16 with a prophecy of the resurrection: “I saw the Lord always before me... you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay” (v.25-27). Then in Psalm 110 they saw a vision of Jesus’s entry into the presence of the Heavenly Father: (v.34): “The Lord said to My Lord, Sit at my right hand”.

Peter saw the Ascension as a fulfilment of the prophecy in the book of Daniel with its gleaming clothes and “the son of man coming with the clouds of heaven”. The great desire of Jewish believers was that one day heaven and earth might be united together and the gulf that existed between them might be taken away. Now, Peter says, heaven and earth are brought close together.

## **V Reasons to celebrate the Ascension**

Let’s remember that Jesus had said to the disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them “in His Fathers’ House’, where there are many rooms (John 14: 2). So the Ascension is the event in which they could celebrate the fact that, though Jesus was no longer on this earth confined by time and space, He was in God’s house.

I want to suggest four reasons why we should celebrate the Ascension.

**1)** First, the Ascension shows that the crucifixion ends in glory.

Jesus’s death is closely linked in the gospels to his Ascension for it meant, not just leaving this earth but entering into the closer presence of God in heaven. The gospel writers told their tale from the start with Jesus’s glorification in heaven as the climax.

The cloud which enveloped Jesus is a sign that He has entered His glory in the presence of God. According to John’s gospel The Son of Man must be lifted up (and enter into heaven) so “that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life” (John 3 v. 15). As the NT writers described it, not only did Jesus enter heaven, but He sat down, His work completed. As on the cross He had said ‘It is finished’. (Hebrews 1: v.3).

## 2. Second, the authority of Jesus

The sitting down in heaven is seen as the act of one who has been given authority. Jesus ended His earthly life as an apparent failure, hanging on a cross. But by his self-giving love on the cross He demonstrated why He had been given the right to rule over human kind. Ephesians chapter 1 (vv. 20-21) describes the Father's power which worked "in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and *seated Him at his right hand in the heavenly places*, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion ... not only in this age but also in the one to come".

3. Thirdly, the Ascension is closely linked to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised His disciples: "I am going to send you what my Father has promised" (Luke 24 v.49). The world-wide mission of the Church is given here as the disciples are told to be witnesses of the resurrection in the world. And our message becomes, the importance of "repentance and the forgiveness of sins [which] will be preached in His name to all nations" (Luke 24 v.47). Jesus delegated His ministry to His church and sent the Holy Spirit so we might be equipped for that work.

4. Fourthly, the Ascension speaks of Jesus's care for His church. According to the epistles to the Romans and the Hebrews what Jesus is doing today in His Father's house is interceding for the Saints, as the High Priest used to do in the temple (Romans 8: v. 34; Hebrews 4 v. 14). Jesus is not absent from His people. When Stephen was martyred as he died, he cried "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7: v.56). That was the faith of the early Christians.

The Ascension - shows that the crucifixion ends in glory:

In the Ascension Jesus is given authority and power and dominion for all time;

The Ascension is closely linked to the sending of the Holy Spirit;

And, there we are reminded that Jesus in heaven is caring for His church.

The Ascension is not just about the good news that Jesus will one day return. It is good news *now*, that He is reigning in heaven and present with us. Amen