

## Homily: No earthly use?

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

You may have heard the expression, “so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use”. It came immediately to mind when I read the Ascension account in Acts 1. After Jesus’ final words to his apostles, now eleven in number, he is taken up into the clouds and disappears from their sight. And the apostles are left standing there, gazing intently up into the sky: we might imagine their mouths gaping open in astonishment; their hands shielding their eyes from the sun as they peer intently to see if they can still catch a glimpse of him.

But what are they looking for? What are they expecting will happen next?

And we might wonder too how long would they have stood there; and what might have been said or done had not two angelic messengers intervened. Who would have been the first to break the strange wonderment of the moment? Peter, maybe, announcing – as he did after the first encounters of Jesus’ resurrection – “I’m off fishing”. Or Thomas stating “Unless he comes back so I can see how he did that, I’m keeping quiet; it’s just too unbelievable for words.” Or perhaps James and John declaring “If we wait just a bit longer, we’re sure he’s going to carry us off to join him so we can share in this glory?”

But we’re saved from such unkind speculations, and the apostles are saved from inertia, by the sudden appearance of two figures arrayed in white, who declare, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Before his death, Jesus prayed for his disciples, saying, “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.”

“So heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use”. The issue is that we can so easily develop a longing for escape from the world and its suffering and darkness that we fix our gaze rather too much on heaven – whatever we imagine that to be.

But we are meant to be of earthly use – of *considerable* earthly use – for two reasons:

First, as Jesus noted in his prayer, we are still in the world, and no amount of wishful thinking or heavenly mindedness is going to take us out of the world. Jesus prays, “Holy Father, keep them in your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.” Many versions gloss these words to render them as “protect them in your name” or “protect them in the power of your name”, and while it is true that we enjoy ultimate protection from God, there can be a temptation to take this in some kind of passive or disengaged way. Jesus’ prayer to “keep them in your name” implies a kind of resilience within, and faithfulness to, God and God’s purposes that stands against and in engagement with the state of the world.

As Peter writes, we should “not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you.” And Peter encourages us to “be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”

The second reason we are meant to be of earthly use flows from this: there is therefore good reason for us still to be in the world – because *there is work to be done on earth*. The apostles were to be equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit to become Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus makes the same call upon our lives: we are to be his witnesses in the world.

The old saying goes that one can be “so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use”.

But it seems to me just as much of a problem if we are so *earthly* minded as to be of no *heavenly* use.

Have you noticed that Jesus doesn’t really answer the apostles’ question, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”, but instead goes on to tell them that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit and will become his witnesses throughout the world. The problem is that the apostles are still earthly minded. They are longing for a kingdom in earthly style. The ways of the kingdoms of the earth involve the exercise of status, ambition, manipulation, power, and force. The apostles, along with their countrymen and

women, longed for the installation of a descendant of David to the throne of Israel rather than someone who was a puppet of Rome, someone who would rule as God's good shepherd over the people, and who would toss the oppressors out. When that happened, it was believed, Israel would be elevated and would rule the rest of the world, the nations would be judged for their evildoing, and the world put to rights.

But God's ways are not humankind's ways. Jesus' kingdom is not going to come about or be maintained through such worldly means as power, force, oppression – or even its more moderate means of administrative government's regulations and bureaucracy. The strange ways of God mean that it is through weakness and suffering that Jesus becomes king – and not just King of the Jews (as Pilate was unwittingly to state in the notice in three languages posted on the cross), but King of the whole world.

These days the calendar of the church sets aside the Sunday before Advent as the feast of Christ the King. It has led some to ask when it is that Christ became King. Mind you, we might ask the same question of any modern monarch. When did Elizabeth the Second become Queen? She acceding to the throne immediately upon the death of her father; she was proclaimed queen throughout her realms shortly thereafter; and was crowned over a year later. We know that some countries that formerly paid her allegiance as queen have gone on to become republics; thus the reverse is also possible, so Elizabeth might yet become queen over some other land. And we know too that there are some within her realms that repudiate her reign.

In the same way there are several points at which we could say that Jesus Christ became King. In the gospels the concepts of kingdom and exaltation and authority are found variously associated with Jesus' death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his return at the end of the age. Jesus went to his death as Messiah, as Israel's King representing and on behalf of his people. In his rising again Jesus was vindicated, and was shown to have "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). At his ascension he was enthroned at the right hand of God the Father.

But Jesus' kingship is yet to be fully realised: there are hearts and minds that are still not living under his just and reconciling rule. That will happen at last at the end of the present

age, when Christ returns: “Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” And when Jesus returns, heaven and earth will be joined, and God will rule over all.

There is the risk that we can be “so earthly minded as to be of no heavenly use”. Caught up in the affairs of the world; using, and used by, its structures of power; living this life as if there is no tomorrow; concerned only for what pleases us; on the one hand despairing without hope at poverty and injustice and war, or on the other hand going along blissfully unaware or intentionally ignoring the deep brokenness that exists; weighed down by anxiety and fear and guilt ... caught up in our earthly mindedness, we can fail to serve the heavenly purpose, the *God-given* purpose, for which we were created from the beginning and to which Jesus calls his followers afresh: “you are to be my witnesses, here in the place you live, in the surrounding area you know, over there where strangers dwell, and to the very ends of the earth.”

(And as a little reminder of what this work of witness might involve, note that the Greek word for “witness” gives us the word “martyr”. This is not to say that witnessing will necessarily cost us our life. Nor is it to say that we should seek martyrdom for self-glorifying ends. But it is a little pointer to the fact that there is a deadly clash of rival kings and kingdoms at stake here.)

So what are we to do?

Well one thing we are to do is to pray.

After the visit of angelic messengers prompted them to get moving along, the apostles returned to Jerusalem to the upper room and there they all joined together constantly in prayer.

Ascension is a great time to be thinking about prayer, because, as the book of Hebrews teaches us, one of the roles Jesus undertakes at the right hand of the Father is the role of intercession. “We have a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord,

not by a mere human being.” (8:1b-2) “He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them”. (7:25)

And, as I said a couple of weeks ago, part of God’s intention for humankind was a priestly role – interceding for the rest of creation. Prayer for the concerns of the world is part of our human vocation, a vocation Christ has restored and purified, and then equipped us for by the giving of his Spirit.

Prayer is many things. Peter enjoins us to “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” In prayer we bring the cares of the world, our fears, our hopes and longings, the temptations that challenge us, our failures and needs ... we bring the whole of our lives lived in all the muck and mire and confusion of this world to the only One motivated wholly by the purpose of bringing about the good of his beloved children.

In this period between Ascension and Pentecost, we are asked to join in with a global initiative – started by the Archbishop of Canterbury, but now embracing many denominations and countries – praying “thy kingdom come”. We are praying for lives to be submitted to the gracious loving rule of God and Christ Jesus. We are praying for this at the global scale in terms of nations. And we are praying for this at the intimate level for those we love and care for. Rather than asking as the apostles did, “Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel”, we are committing ourselves to the work of prayer in which we actually participate in the coming of the kingdom, the coming of his kingly rule.

You, like me, probably have close friends and relatives who do not know the love of Christ. You, like me, may have almost lost hope that they will ever accept his gentle and just rule in their lives.

In prayer we bring our longings and hopes to God, and as we involve ourselves in this work of God, God acts in the mystery of his love and power. Christine and I have been praying for five couples or families dear to us for the last two years. We rejoice that we have recently heard that one of the members of one of those families has become a deeply committed Christian, and is herself now being a witness.

I encourage you to take up the challenge of praying, especially in this week – but ideally forming a pattern that will go on.

There are many ways this prayer challenge can be undertaken. You could simply pray as you feel prompted, conversationally sharing your desires with our loving and understanding God. You might light a candle for each one you're praying for. You might set aside some time to walk the labyrinth with these intentions held in your heart and mind. You might find one or two others to partner in prayer with you.

If you find it helpful to have some structure or words there are many resources available online. I offer one approach that I have found helpful, which is to structure prayer around the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. [This is available to download from the link following the sermon on the website].

We are called to be both so heavenly minded (in the sense of being motivated by God's purposes) that we are of immense earthly use to an earth that so needs to be brought back to our Creator; and so earthly minded (in the sense of being aware of and concerned for the state of the world) that we are of heavenly use in advancing God's purposes to redeem all things.

And prayer is one of the ways in which we bring our heavenly and earthly mindedness together so that we might usefully serve both ends.