

Sunday 21 May 2023 - 7th Sunday of Easter

Here we are on the Sunday after the third most important feast in the Christian Calendar, although we might be hard pressed to believe it. Obviously, importance wise, Easter is the Queen of feasts, that most important day on which we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Second in importance is Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday. The third is Ascension Day. You will be thinking “The old duffer has finally lost it. What about Christmas?” In the old calendars of the church, Christmas was not as important as these three feasts. We were not the only ones for whom this was the story; in some Protestant churches Christmas was not even celebrated. For many years the Presbyterian, and other Calvinist churches, did not go to church at Christmas. In many ways we only think that Christmas ranks up there because of its commercial importance.

In the account of the Ascension from the Acts of the Apostles, S Luke tells us: “While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?’”

If we think back to Easter, we might remember that when the women went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body, they saw, as S Mark tells us, “... a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.’”

Then, as now in our own time, many people all over the world are looking for Jesus, although some might not realise that is what they are searching for. Where is Jesus to be found? He certainly is not, as we are told by the angel, in a tomb. The bones of Jesus are not buried somewhere in Israel, despite what some biblical scholars may say.

For those searching for Jesus their gaze might be into heaven; again as we are told by the angels, that will not produce an answer either.

In the Acts of the Apostles S Luke gives us the last moments of our Lord with his disciples. They had assembled in Jerusalem and he gave them his final instructions and told them to wait in the city until they had received the promised Holy Spirit.

So Luke records his final words: "... '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.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."

At the end of his Gospel So Luke says the same thing slightly differently. In Luke 24:50-53 we read, "And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God."

These two passages contain the image we have in our minds when we consider the Ascension – he was parted from them and a cloud took him from their sight. Their response to the event of the ascension is important for us. They worshipped him.

The feast of the Ascension is an important feast in the annual life of the church. It is one we should take seriously. Our response to the feast should be the same as that of the disciples. We should worship God.

So John the Baptist had gone around prior to the ministry of Jesus proclaiming to the people that the Kingdom of God was near. Part of what he was saying is that heaven is not something that is far removed from us. Our life here on earth and our life in heaven is not separated by a huge gulf. Earth, and the realm of the physical, is close to heaven and the realm of the spiritual. The veil which marks the border between them is very thin. There are some places where we experience that thinness. When we worship the veil becomes even thinner.

So Luke, in both his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, describes for us what happened on this side of the veil as Jesus ascended into heaven. The major thought is that a cloud took him from human sight. Have you ever wondered what happened on the other side of the veil?

We are given a hint of this in the book of Daniel, in the Old Testament. In chapter 7 we read: "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. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him.”

In Luke we saw Jesus going in the clouds – here we see “one like a son of man” coming with the clouds of heaven. The term ‘son of man’ is one which Jesus often applied, in his teaching, to himself. He comes in the clouds and approaches God the Father – the ‘Ancient of Days’. There he is given authority, glory and sovereign power. He is the King of Heaven – Christ the King! All nations, and people of every language worship him.

During his last moments on earth, Jesus, as he ascended, was worshipped by the disciples. In Daniel’s vision the son of man is worshipped by all nations and people of every language. In his ascension Jesus has taken his power and begun to reign.

And what of us? What is required of us is that we should be drawn into worship. We are to worship our ascended Lord. Some of you might remember what I said on the 8th January, when we thought about the Epiphany. The Greek word for worship is, as I said then, προσκυνεο, which means to prostrate with one’s forehead touching the floor, but also, for us, to move towards to kiss. That is what we do when we worship Jesus; it’s as if we move towards him to kiss him.

As we worship, we will experience that the veil between heaven and earth can indeed be experienced as very thin. In our worship it’s as if we press our lips through the veil to kiss. We find ourselves drawn into the loving presence of our God. What a blessing!

As we more and more become part of the worshipping community of faith we will find that God changes us to be what he first intended us to be. We will find we will communicate with him in prayer and grow in grace. We will find that, although we are not perfect, we have indeed been freed from our slavery to sin. Our experience of God will equip us to become that which S Luke records Jesus commissioning us to be. He said: “...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” By that, I am sure the Lord meant New Zealand!

May the Risen and Ascended Jesus continue to bless you this Ascensontide.