

ADDRESS**28 May 2017****Sunday after Ascension**

Acts 1.1-11	The Ascension
Psalms 47	King of the nations
Ephesians 1.15-23	Christ the power of God
Matthew 28.16-20	The Ascension

Open our minds, O Lord, to hear and to understand your Word, and open our hearts to do your will. We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.

There are 19 churches and sacred sites on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, to the east of Jerusalem, and pilgrims still walk the paths that Jesus walked during his time on earth, to and from the Old City and the villages of Bethany and Bethpage. *Connections* has a picture of one of the smallest and shabbiest and most neglected of these, the Chapel of the Ascension.

The chapel was originally built in the 4th century on the site which early Christians venerated as the place where Jesus ascended to the Father, 40 days after his resurrection. The chapel was built without a roof, as a symbol that nothing comes between Jesus and heaven, but has been destroyed and rebuilt several times and now has a clumsily-built mediaeval stone roof.

One of the few stones which remain from the original building is the large flat stone in the courtyard, on which it is said that the faithful can see the mark of Jesus' last footprint as he left earth for heaven. I did not dare tell the custodian that I could not see it.

The neglected chapel is a symbol of the general neglect of the festival of the Ascension, especially in the English-speaking world. In many countries of Europe, and in Indonesia, last Thursday, Ascension Day, was a public holiday. In Australia, very few churches even held services on the day, and, for most people, it was simply another ordinary working day.

Our liturgy speaks of Jesus' mighty resurrection and glorious ascension – the Resurrection reveals his power over sin and death, and the Ascension displays his glory as one person of the holy Trinity. So there are many reasons why we should both venerate and celebrate the Ascension, as part of the sacred sequence which begins on Maundy Thursday and ends on Trinity Sunday – Maundy Thursday - Good Friday - Easter Day - the Ascension- Pentecost, and finally Trinity Sunday, which celebrates the Christian understanding of God as personal, intimate and triune.

From then on, we worship Sunday by Sunday in the full understanding of God as Trinity, until we begin the next sacred sequence – Advent, Christmas and the Epiphany. The church calendar helps us to celebrate the full extent of God's grace, not just focus on one or two aspects of it.

So why venerate and celebrate the Ascension? Here is one good reason – on this day we celebrate Jesus' going home, his returning to be in the presence of the Father. As the men in

white told the gaping disciples – *Jesus has been taken up from you into heaven.* Some unknown preacher has summarised it this way:

At the Ascension Jesus left the Here for the Everywhere;

He left the Time for the Eternal;

He left the First Century to fill All the Centuries."

Think about those sentences– *Jesus left the here for the everywhere.* The human Jesus could be only in one place at the one time. Several passages in the Gospels suggest that Jesus' first priority was to redeem the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This was also to be the first priority of his disciples, to fulfil the prophecies in the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus' healing ministry had no boundaries, but, again, he could heal only those who came to him or whom he came across.

By leaving earth, Jesus made way for the Spirit to extend his ministry to all peoples. We shall celebrate the explosion of the Spirit next Sunday when we shall hear again how the power of God fell upon the people of every nation under heaven. Too much of our understanding of God, too much of our patterns of worship, are derived from our own culture – we can learn so much from our indigenous peoples, and from the peoples of other races and other cultures.

For many centuries Christian missions stood in the way of a full understanding of the Gospel by trying to convert the native peoples into Europeans or Americans as well as into Christians. Only in the last century did they begin to allow them to allow them to worship in their own language and to sacralise parts of their own cultures. So the Christmas pageant I once saw in a church in Port Moresby was very different from what we see in our churches – the little angels wore grass skirts and frangipani in their hair and shell bracelets around their ankles, but they honoured the black Christ child as reverently as we honour the white one.

He left the time for the eternal. Jesus lived on earth for only 30 or 33 years; he ministered for only three years at the most. In the light of the Ascension, we recognise that the heavenly Jesus has been with us from the beginning of time. As John's gospel puts it so majestically -- *He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

Not just the light of the house of Israel or the Gentiles of Palestine, or its Roman overlords, but the light of all peoples, everywhere, at all times. One of the great achievements of the Reformation was to give worship back to the people, by ministering both word and sacrament in their everyday, living language. Worship, like Jesus himself, was to be truly human and contemporary.

However, for many people, Luther's mass or Cranmer's prayer book of the 16th century or the King James Version of the Bible of the 17th C became the only way of worship or of expressing

God's word, just as the Latin mass was seen as the only way of worshipping God, for many centuries. In 2011, I went to several services to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the King James bible. At one of these events, an earnest lady assured me that *if this Bible was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.*

He left the first century to fill all the centuries. The story of the people of God does fill all the centuries, from the time of Noah, who was blameless before God in his generation, through the struggles of the children of Israel to reclaim their holy land, through the turmoil of the Reformation and the counter-reformation, to the martyrs of the 20th C in the third Reich and elsewhere, to the continuing witness of persecuted Christian communities in the Middle East and the growing churches of China and South America and Africa.

But Jesus was a man of his time, as well as the God of all times, so his Ascension released the power of the Spirit to work with people in new and unimagined ways, through the church which became his new body. The English term Holy Ghost, is actually derived from the Anglo-Saxon words for 'holy guest' – the Spirit has been living with us and within each one of us in the fellowship of the church for more than 20 centuries, and will continue until Christ's return signals the end of time as we know it.

Last week Peter spoke about the latest results of the McCrindle survey of church attendance in Australia, which you can find on the web. The survey shows, among other things, that more people are now worshipping in comparatively new Pentecostal churches than in Anglican or other long-established churches. Only the Roman Catholic church has more people attending regularly. Why is this? Perhaps one reason is that many people are looking for more contemporary ways of understanding the One who is the God of all time, not simply the God of past times. Now we can even worship God in virtual reality, in the Anglican cathedral on Epiphany Island in Second Life, and on many other sites on the worldwide web..

A second good reason to celebrate the Ascension is that it commemorates Jesus' passing the baton of earthly ministry to us. It's not a perfect analogy, but think of the baton relays at each Olympic Games and each Commonwealth Games. On 13th March this year, after a service in Westminster Abbey, the Queen handed the baton of next year's Commonwealth Games to the Australian cyclist Anna Meares to begin its long journey, through the 52 nations of the Commonwealth, until it arrives in Canberra in time for Australia Day, and begins to travel around Australia. Today the baton is being carried through Uganda.

So our Gospel reading tells us that the risen Christ, the king of all nations, handed the mission of proclaiming the kingdom of heaven to his first disciples on the day of his Ascension. They in turn handed it on to others, generation after generation. Now baton has been passed to us. We all

have the responsibility of making disciples, of leading them to baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, and of teaching them to obey his commandments. We cannot leave the responsibility to Peter and Steve and the ministry team, and we know we cannot fulfil our mission in our own strength, so he has promised to be with us until he returns.

Today's reading from the letter to the Ephesians is a reminder that, when Jesus left his old earthly body behind, the church became his new earthly body, containing the fullness of the God who fills all in all. As St John reminds us, *From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace*. Many of us could testify to that, from our own life experience.

The two letters of Paul to Timothy preserved in the New Testament model the relationship the leaders of the church should have with its members, and believers with the community. For example, he writes *You . . . have followed my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, my faith, my patience, my love, my endurance, as well as the persecutions and sufferings that happened to me in Antioch, in Iconium, and in Lystra. I endured these persecutions and the Lord delivered me from them all* (2 Tim.3.10-11). He will deliver today's believers from their persecutors as well – when we lose hope, we need to remember the survival and revival of the church in Russia and in China.

Finally, a third good reason to celebrate the Ascension is that it reveals the way Jesus will return to earth in his second coming, not as a helpless baby, but with all the glory of the Godhead, or, in the words of today's Psalm, as king of the nations.

The book of the Acts tells us that the first reaction of the disciples when they gathered around Jesus for the last time was to look back – to ask whether his leaving them meant that the kingdom of David was to be restored. But, once he had left, they began to look forward, to prepare for the coming of the Spirit by devoting themselves to prayer, along with other members of the community, including the women who had been among his followers, and members of his family.

Now that the baton has been passed to us we need always to be ready for the promised return of the glorified, ascended Christ. We don't know exactly how it will happen – we are told a cloud took him away, so will he return in an actual cloud? Or on a cloud? Will he return seated on a throne? However it happens, the joy of his people will be too great for words.

There is a divine mystery here, but we rejoice in the knowledge that the Christ who ascended to heaven in glory will return in glory, to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth, and that those who have accepted his grace will share in his glory. For the promise he gave while he was on earth is good for eternity: *Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*" (Matthew 25.34). We can't ask for anything more.

God our Father, make us joyful in the ascension of your son Jesus Christ; give us the faith to follow him into your heavenly home, for his ascension is also our glory and our hope. AMEN.