



Revd Ro's Reflection on Seventh Sunday of Easter

Year A

Acts 1.6-14

John 17.1-11

On this Sunday after Ascension Day we look back to the ascension of Jesus. The reading is from Acts chapter one, Luke in his gospel has given an account of the ascension, (Luke 24.44-53). It is interesting to read these two accounts together as indeed Acts is the sequel to his gospel.

The ascension of Jesus is not an easy topic and the theology is profound. I remember once having to take a school Ascension Day assembly. I had prepared what I had to say carefully and thoughtfully but it is a tough ask. I managed well enough with the older children but the youngsters, aged 5-6, were quite a different matter. They were as good as gold I have to say but after a bit one of them whispered audibly, 'Why doesn't Revd Ro shut up?' Out of the mouths! Needless to say I wound it up as well as I could. That amusing story makes a very important point. The ascension needs a lot of thought if we are to get to the heart of it, it is a mystery that no one can properly explain; the best we can do is offer our thoughts.

In Luke's gospel the ascension is placed after the meeting with the followers on the Emmaus road. After their epiphany moment they rush back to Jerusalem and join the disciples in the upper room to tell them of the wonderful happening and of their meeting with the risen Lord. Suddenly Jesus is among them. It is vital I think if we start in Luke's first book if we are to come anywhere close to understanding the mystery of the ascension. Let's begin where the disciples are,

'Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.' (Luke 24)

That is the point. They thought they were seeing a ghost, a spirit with no bodily reality. If that were true just think of the implication for the resurrection and the whole message of Jesus. Indeed of its implication for us. Jesus has got to scotch that idea for a start and show them the reality. Jesus is not a ghost brought back by a strange trick of the supernatural. It isn't like that at all!

'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?'³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I

have.’⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish,⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.’

Jesus is real, he is alive, he is risen. He appears in bodily form and he can do anything he could before his death. All that is fact and he demonstrates it. Look at me you can see the wounds, indeed to Thomas he says put your finger in them. But they still can't get their heads around it so he eats in front of them. The wonder and the mystification is natural and it is what we feel when trying to understand it too. Jesus can do all these things but he can also appear in locked rooms, he can disappear at the breaking of bread in the house on the Emmaus road. This is not a normal body, of course it isn't, it is Jesus, the risen Lord and God. Jesus is the portal between earth and heaven, between the heavenly dimension and the earthly.

What Jesus does next is to teach them of how the scriptures pointed to him, just as he did on the walk to Emmaus,

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.’

‘You are witnesses of these things,’ that is the key and they are to spread the message to the ends of the earth. This is the account from Luke's gospel so now we turn to Acts. On Ascension Day we have the whole passage from verse one and it is good to read this together with today's.

⁶ ‘So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ (Acts 1)

We have to go back a bit, Jesus's followers saw him as Messiah, God's anointed, the one who would fulfil the scriptures. He would rule in Israel, Israel would therefore overthrow its oppressors under his leadership and Israel would rule throughout the world and the nations would be drawn to God. What actually happened was not a bit what they had expected. Jesus was crucified as a common criminal for treason. They were scattered and that dream was shattered. Now suddenly, Jesus is alive and with them, so was their dream for the future going to come true? Yes it was, but not in the way they foresaw. It is God's way they must understand.

So Jesus shows them how he is Messiah and Lord, it is he whom Moses and the prophets point to. God's Kingdom will come on earth; they must now begin to understand how that will be, because it is not through fighting the Romans.

Let's go back to Jesus' risen body. He can eat, they can touch him, he is no ghost and yet he has powers that are not of this world, he is human and divine. Jesus is God incarnate, that is what they are seeing. Their question is when you will restore the kingdom to Israel. Well actually God's kingdom will be restored in his own time, but what they are seeing in Jesus is the beginning of that kingdom here on earth.

⁷ ‘He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.’

This sentence is so easily overlooked but it is of huge significance. God will restore the kingdom here on earth, Jesus will return at his second coming to judge the earth. But actually Jesus is King of the cosmos of the whole of creation. Jesus is part of the trinity, the co-creator. In God's time the whole

of creation will be restored in his recreated order. Jesus stands before them, he is the beginning of this.

⁸ 'But 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.'

Jesus gives his great promise to them; 'you will receive the Holy Spirit.' That is the power from God on high, his authorisation to go out in his name. Then the commission, go and witness. Don't rush off and start proclaiming yet, wait. The Holy Spirit will embolden them, strengthen them and it will enlighten them. They will begin to understand, to see clearly. What is more they will act in God's name and receive the power from on high. God will act through them and do signs and wonderful works. We see that lived out in the book of Acts.

So for now they must wait in faith and trust in Jesus' promise. What happens next is what they must have been dreading; their Lord so recently restored to them leaves them.

⁹ 'When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.'

How are we to understand this? The word 'up' leads us to think that he was taken up into heaven which is somehow somewhere else up there beyond the clouds. It has led to the whole idea of heaven as up there somewhere! But actually we need, I think, to concentrate instead on the word 'cloud'. The cloud in the bible indicates the presence of God, think of the 'pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night' which lead the Israelites at the exodus, or the cloud that descended on the Mount of the transfiguration. So then here Jesus has entered into the presence of God, God's dominion if you like. The early Christians would have understood this. Seen like this, heaven and earth are one in that heaven, if you like, is a different dimension

Jesus' resurrection body illustrates this meeting of the two, the reality of the human body together with the heavenly body, the body of God's dimension. It's clumsily explained, but we do struggle to express the holy mysteries, how could it be otherwise. One day, in God's time, Jesus will return and the whole of creation will be transformed. Then, as Paul puts it, 'we will see face to face.'

¹¹ 'This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Jesus will return as King and judge. Until then we, with those first disciples, have Jesus' commission, to go out in his name and to live in his way. We, like them, are not alone because the Holy Spirit of God is with us. After they have witnessed the ascension, look what they do.

¹² 'Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.'

We are told the remaining apostles return from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem, there they join their companions. Note Jesus' brothers are now part of the community and Mary Jesus's mother is of course present. She was, we remember, passed by Jesus at his crucifixion into John's protection. We can guess that the other women are those like Mary Magdalene, who were the ones who had constantly followed Jesus and ministered to him. There they wait for the fulfilment of Jesus' promise. Indeed the Holy Spirit will come upon them and transform and enlighten them and we will see this at Pentecost. Meanwhile they obey Jesus and wait, they devote themselves to prayer. That

is so important it is at the heart of the Christian life, as indeed it was at the heart of Jesus' life. He continually speaks to God in prayer and everything he does is in God's name and in God's power. All of his works are signs that point to God. This is illustrated by our gospel reading, it is Jesus' prayer for his disciples.

In last week's gospel passage we saw Jesus promising that he would not leave his followers comfortless but that his Father would send the Holy Spirit to strengthen them. The 'farewell discourse' as it is called ends at this point, and John chapter 17 begins the 'farewell prayer.' Jesus is no longer addressing his disciples, he is addressing his Father and interceding for his disciples, and by extension for his followers throughout the ages. It is a profound and beautiful prayer for protection for his followers and for their protection.

The Gospel of John was written much later than the synoptic gospels. Throughout his gospel the evangelist examines not only events from Jesus' life but, most importantly, the very nature of Jesus as part of the divine. This is so obvious in the farewell discourse and the farewell prayer. Right at the beginning of his gospel John sets out exactly who Jesus is.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.' (John 1.1)

Jesus is of God and he is God, 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me.' 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.'

So Jesus prays to his Father while the disciples listen to his prayer.

^{17.1} 'After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.'

Jesus says that the 'hour has come;' it is the culmination of his work on earth. Now he will finish that work; now, through his crucifixion and resurrection, he will bring salvation to all who believe in him and win eternal life for all who turn to him. King Jesus' throne is the cross and it is on the cross that he will glorify God by acting out his purpose. God will glorify his son. Paul puts it like this in Philippians 2,

⁵ 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

⁷But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

⁸ And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

⁹ Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:' All authority is given to Jesus, and he wins eternal life for all who turn to him. How does he describe eternal life?

³ 'And this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' (John 17)

Those who trust in God, who accept Jesus' teachings and try to live in his way, will be united with him. One day we will be citizens in God's newly created order.

As we read Jesus' words in verse 5, the opening of John's gospel comes back to us, Jesus was in the beginning with God,

⁵ 'So now Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.'

The glory that Jesus is referring to is that of his relationship to God before his incarnation, in other words the glory of the divine relationship. This is at the heart of Jesus' self-revelation to his followers in his farewell prayer. He has fulfilled the task that God gave him, in that he has revealed to them, and all who believe in him, the word of God and the nature of God in Jesus Christ. They have recognised in Jesus, the God who sent him,

⁷ 'Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.'

That goes not just for the disciples but all of us who believe in Jesus and try to live out his commandments. Jesus is praying for his disciples here but his prayer is for all his followers through history and on into the future. 'All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them,' this clearly shows Jesus' unity with the Father and his closeness to all who follow him. As God incarnate Jesus is the face of God that human beings have seen. Jesus prays to his Father for protection for his followers. He knows exactly what dangers all that follow him will face; indeed he is soon to walk the way of persecution and death himself. He has warned them that to be a Christian will be hard, that it might mean 'taking up their cross daily' indeed literally so he intercedes, because soon they must be without him in this world

¹¹ 'And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.' Jesus knew quite well that his disciples would have tough lives from now on. He gives them the responsibility of continuing the work God gave him to do. He commissions them to take the word of God to all nations and most importantly to act it out in love.

At his ascension Jesus returned to his Father but as he has said, 'I will not leave you orphaned.' Next week we celebrate Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit of God. It is because of his return to the Father that Jesus is present with us always, 'even to the end of the age.' That does not mean life is easy, sometimes life can be very tough, but it does mean that God, the Holy Trinity, is as close as our own breathing. That we have only to call on God to know that he is there, strengthening, sustaining and walking alongside all who believe in him and try to live in his way of love.

'Give us O Lord a steadfast and unconquered heart, which no tribulation can wear out, ... Give us O Lord, understanding to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you and a faithfulness that may embrace you, through Jesus Christ our Lord.' St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74.)

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