

Sunday 21 May 2023
Holy Trinity (08.00) & (11.00)
Holy Communion
Easter 7 (Sunday after Ascension Day)

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

As it was Ascension Day this last Thursday I thought we might look at our reading from Acts a little more closely.

Of course, Luke was the author of both the Gospel account which bears his name and the book of Acts, but despite this fact these opening verses from the book of Acts we heard earlier, make it clear that this is not simply a sequel to the Gospel account. It's not an addendum to the story of the teaching and ministry of Jesus, but rather that this is where the action really begins. The resurrection has heralded the breaking-in of something radically new. This is now about what Jesus called 'the promise of the Father' that they were all told to wait for. There's a strong emphasis on looking forward rather than back.

So, here, in verses 5 and 8, we see an excited anticipation of the Holy Spirit. The disciples will cease to be confused by what's happening, as they have been all through Luke, and will be ready to stand tall and tell people the extraordinary, life-changing story of Jesus.

First, though, comes one of the story's strangest episodes; at least, strange to our modern literal minds. Jesus, it says, was 'lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight'.

But, perhaps we are getting a bit ahead of ourselves. We should get back to the action Luke describes in our reading this morning.

Those poor disciples. What they have been through over the last few weeks. What wild swings of emotion they have had to deal with. First of all there were the horrors of Good Friday, the anguish they felt for Jesus, the fear for themselves, the guilt over what they had done and the confusion over their future now that Jesus' mission had apparently failed.

Then there were the rumours that Jesus was alive, risen from the dead with all the hope, terror and sheer perplexity of that.

And then, at last, some kind of normality again with Jesus back among them, talking, teaching, making them feel at the centre of God's world, just as he always had done.

It's quite difficult from the Gospels or from any of Paul's writings to tell just how long the period from the resurrection to Jesus' ascension was. The Church's official liturgical calendar suggests that this was just a few weeks. In Matthew's Gospel it looks pretty short, while Paul seems to extend it to include his conversion on the road to Damascus.

John's account is probably the most vivid, with details of significant meetings and memorable meals.

But, for sheer poignancy, these first few verses in Acts are hard to beat. If you look at verse 6, right at the beginning of this morning's reading, the disciples are clearly imagining that life will now go on much like the old days, only better.

Jesus seems willing to concentrate only on them, with no preaching, teaching or healing outsiders, and he listens to them and answers their questions without the teasing and impatience that so often marked their relationship before. Their doubts and misgivings have all passed away and they are back to believing that Jesus is going to take over Israel, and they are going to be part of the new ruling party. Then, all of a sudden, they find out that he's not staying and, worse than that, that he expects them to carry on without him. So, we hear that they trudged back to Jerusalem and it all sounds as though it has gone very flat. There's no description of their emotions - no fear, no despair, no joy. They're all out of feelings.

One minute they're the inner circle, waiting to hear about the plans for the Kingdom of Israel and their vital part in that, and the next minute, they're a leaderless, purposeless bunch. Jesus hasn't told them what's going on but has left them with a job to do, and a very daunting one at that. They are going to be his witnesses, all over the world but first they have to wait for this special Holy Spirit, whatever that might be. Either way, it had better be pretty good if it is going to get this emotionally drained bunch of waifs and strays going again.

However, it's not all doom and gloom.

Those disciples have at least learned two things through what they've been through.

First, they have learned to stick together - whatever happens this time, they all want to witness it together.

Then second, they have learned to keep praying.

If the crucifixion didn't mean the end of everything the disciples thought they understood about God, then God's purposes have to be deeper, wider and stranger than anything they could imagine, and their only chance of not getting it hopelessly wrong a second time is for them to keep praying.

You could argue that the disciples hardly realised the significance of those two lessons learned, but sticking together and praying are to become the defining characteristics of this new Christian community that we discover as we read further into the book of Acts.

So, how do we summarise all of this?

Luke is clearly passionate and enthusiastic about the presence and role of the Holy Spirit in the Church. He has written for us an account of the ascension, but his real focus is the continuity of the presence of Christ in the world. Jesus may not be with us in body, but he is always with us through the Holy Spirit. This is a story about hope and power.

We may or may not have celebrated the ascension last Thursday and, even if we did not, it is not a sad occasion when the world lost Christ. It is, though, an occasion to celebrate the era of the Holy Spirit in us. Through our baptism and the Eucharist, we go out into the world as disciples of Christ, the risen and ascended Lord, empowered just like those first disciples with the Holy Spirit. And it is through that same power of that same Spirit, that we are called to be the light, the salt and the leaven in the world.

By living our faith well, people will not see us - they will see Christ in us.
This is how we shine and how we become true agents of the Holy Spirit.
May it be so for each one of us and for the glory of him whose name is above all names,
Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.