

Christ Church
Ascension Day May 13th 2021

Acts 1.1-11; Luke 24.44-end

The disciples “returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the Temple blessing God.” Christ’s Ascension had had such a terrific affect upon them. But then it was an event like no other. And that’s perhaps why it has, by tradition, been the Patronal Festival for Christ Church. And I’m so lucky, because I’ve only been here five minutes, and I’m preaching at this Church’s Patronal Festival! So I’m grateful to be given the honour.

I have to give the choice of readings here a little mention as well, because it’s unusual to have both passages of Scripture written by the same person for the same Service. St Luke was the author both of St Luke’s Gospel and the Book of Acts. And so there are lots of similarities both in the style and the account. But what St Luke was describing was very unusual indeed. And it was unusual right from the Crucifixion, when the disciples were left desperate, desolate and bereft. Jesus had left them in a terrible way ... and in a terrible state. But then, quite soon after that, they witnessed His Resurrection. And the time between the Resurrection and the Ascension – this Biblical forty days – seems to have been a time of growing, learning and consolidation.

We don’t know how Jesus looked after the Resurrection. We know that He ate. He wasn’t a ghost. However, He did seem to appear at significant moments, and disappear. But it was a peaceful time. Jesus was obviously no threat to the authorities. Well, they couldn’t crucify Him twice! But neither do we get the impression that He was to the Jewish people as He had been before. He was there for the disciples – and not just the twelve, but any disciple who had been close to Him – who had loved and cared for Him ... and knew Him as far as anybody could. The presence of Jesus, after the Resurrection, was not something we will ever fully understand. But the effect that these Biblical forty days had on the disciples was quite incredible, because they gained considerably in knowledge and confidence. And when Jesus left them at the Ascension, they were not sad.

Once again, as with the Resurrection, there were at the scene “two men in white robes” who were able to enlighten the stunned disciples still gazing up to heaven. “This Jesus ... will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven”, they said. But there was, of course, no timescale. The disciples may have thought Jesus would return as quickly as He did at the Resurrection. But in this case, two thousand and twenty-one years later, we’re still waiting. The disciples didn’t have to wait long, though, until the promised Holy Spirit came into their lives. And this gave them a confidence and ability they would never have achieved in any earthly way. We know they went out into “the ends of the earth” as Jesus commanded them. But that’s in the future. Now at this time, we’re here to witness the disciples gazing up into heaven as a cloud covered Jesus, and their Lord and Saviour was gone from their sight. As I’ve said, they weren’t sad.

They were joyful. "They worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy."

But where does their joy leave us? Well, I came to a very simple conclusion, and one of my deaf sight-impaired friends helped me to reach this conclusion. I'll call the lady Nell. I think she'd like to be called Nell! Nell wanted to say her prayers in a Church during her support time last week. Actually, her favourite place is Southwark Cathedral, but just for a change, she settled for a Church in Stratford. Now, Nell considers Jesus to be her friend, or rather should I say, her mate! She doesn't end her prayer with "Amen". She usually says: "Bye! See you next week!"

Last week, I could see she was getting a bit irritable ... presumably with the Lord. I couldn't have that. "What's the matter?" I said.

"I just asked Jesus if He wants me to do anything for Him," she complained. "And He isn't telling me."

"Perhaps Jesus wants you to wait a little while before He tells you," I said.

"And maybe what He wants you to do isn't what you expect. For instance, if a deaf person saw you praying, and they found it difficult to pray themselves, they might come up to you and say: 'please can you help me to say my prayers like you do? You would help them, wouldn't you? It's up to all of us to try to help and inspire the people around us - to know Jesus a little better.'"

Nell nodded. She quite liked the idea of helping people to know Jesus, because Jesus was really worth knowing, in her opinion. But although waiting on Jesus and listening to Him seemed good advice, badgering was more her style!

Fortunately, it wasn't the style of the disciples. Jesus ordered them "not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Holy Spirit."

"Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high," He said. Of course, Jesus was telling the disciples to stay in Jerusalem, so that they could be in one place to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. But I think it was more than that. The Holy Spirit is pretty clever. It could have caught up with all those disciples wherever they were. There was something important about them staying in a group, and becoming stronger and more ready to go out in twos and threes ... once the Holy Spirit had come upon them.

Have you ever attended an event, a Service or a conference that has been really inspiring? All the people with you in that event have been affected in a similar way. But no one in your family or work place or group of friends has shared that experience with you. So you come home all fired up with enthusiasm for the task ahead. Your mind is buzzing. But you can see nobody is there with you. Nobody is fired with the same passion. The fire sometimes goes out in you for lack of inspirational fuel. What you experienced as life-changing quickly becomes a non-event. But for the disciples, it was different. They could keep the fire of enthusiasm kindled. They could share the moment of Ascension with each other. The last words of

Jesus; the cloud descending; the mystery; the sense of joy; the blessing, blessing they received. It was all there – alive and life-giving! And this Holy Spirit – what would it do for them? How would it change them? How would it equip them? What would their life be as they travelled from place to place? All this excitement they could share, because they had all shared the experience.

And for us ... well, perhaps what we have in store isn't quite so exciting for most of us anyway. But I still believe Jesus asks us, as He did the disciples, to go back to our homes, our families, our Churches, and to carry out His work from there. We may go further afield. We may, like the disciples, go to far-flung places. But many of us won't do that, especially with travel restrictions still in place. For most of us, our ministry is around us – just at arm's length – on our doorstep – in our streets – within our families, perhaps. And the Holy Spirit? Well, we may not receive it as dramatically as the disciples did. But it's still there for us to tap into. It hasn't gone away. Christ sent the Holy Spirit for all time. So we are blessed! We are gifted and we are precious in the sight of the Lord!

Franciscans used to be famous, in some circles, for leading Missions in Parishes. It's an old-fashioned term now, but the work of the Mission was to encourage involvement, enthusiasm, and a spark to light the flame of faith where it might be wavering. The favourite time for such an event was **this** time – the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost. And in these ten days, the parishioners and the missionaries would share, encourage and discover. In fact, they would do rather as the disciples might have done as they waited for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. That gift is for us too! And we can teach, encourage and inspire one another, and all those with whom we come into contact. We don't have to preach, as I'm doing. We can **be** for Christ, and the message is felt.

So as we experience this Patronal Festival in Christ Church – this wonderfully timeless event of Christ's Ascension – as we look forward to the day of Pentecost – let's really live these events. Let's feel inside us the meaning for each one of us. And as the disciples prayed joyfully in the Temple, let us continually bless the Lord!

Amen

