

Ascension Day Year B

Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

Luke, from whom we have just heard, is the only gospel writer who records Jesus's actual ascension. For Luke it is a pivotal moment. He ends this first volume of his writing, with an account of it and he records it again, more fully, as we heard, at the beginning of his second volume, The Acts of the Apostles.

There is a good reason Luke does this. The Ascension initiates a transition from the acts of Jesus in the power of Holy Spirit to the acts of his followers in the power of Holy Spirit.

The transition is the reason why the angels' question "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?!" (Acts 1:11a) is so relevant.

Of course, it's a bit of a silly question isn't it, in the circumstances? Whereas would they be looking? The disciples, or rather the apostles, have just watched Jesus, their friend, somehow being lifted up until a cloud hides him from their sight. Where else would they look? We would be the same, wouldn't we?

But the apostles are not looking to see Jesus come back down as if on some sort of cosmic reverse bungee jump. They know better than that. They are not grieving like they did after the crucifixion. There is no aching sense of loss, no despair, no fear that they will be next.

They are different now. Then they hid away behind closed doors, afraid of the authorities. Now they are full of joy – "great joy" Luke tells us (Luke 24:52) – and they "were continually in the temple praising God." Instead of hiding now they are in a very public place.

They are different now. They are joyful. Today, Ascension Day, is a day that almost passes us by but it is a day of joy. What makes the apostles joyful? I don't think that it is entirely, or even mainly, due to the prospect of the reverse bungee. I think that it is much more than that. And I suggest that there are three reasons.

First, and the most important and obvious is that Jesus is alive. He has conquered death and risen from the grave. And, even though he is now hidden from their sight, the risen Jesus is with them forever, as Matthew records at the very end of his gospel, "Lo, I am with you always."

I wonder, do we really appreciate that? Not just with our heads but with our hearts and lives? Is the presence of Jesus a daily reality for us? And if so, what difference does it actually make?

Secondly – and this is something on which we can see that Luke places emphasis because he includes it in both Luke and Acts – secondly, the apostles now understand God’s master plan for his kingdom and Jesus’s role in bringing it about. Whereas before the crucifixion the disciples couldn’t understand what Jesus was trying to tell them about his death now they get it.

Luke records that for forty days Jesus spoke to them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

“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. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,” (Luke 24:44-45)

These young apostles had grown up in a culture where an intimate knowledge of the Scriptures (our Old Testament) was normal. But the words came to life following Jesus’s forty day crash course.

Now they can see that Scripture points to the inevitability of Jesus’s death and resurrection in bringing in God’s kingdom.

Wouldn’t I have loved to be with them for this teaching?! To be fair I do have the Scriptures, New and Old, and the availability of countless books, commentaries, courses and videos to help me get to grips with it. Do I take enough advantage of them?

Because while the kingdom of God includes “repentance and forgiveness of sins” (Luke 24:47) the Old Testament shows us that it is so much broader.

Do we have any handle on this? What concept do we have of the kingdom of God here with us now, “at hand”? What does Jesus mean when he says “the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:20)? What impact does it have on us, on our everyday lives?

The apostles are joyful because they now “get” it. They are seeing the fulfilment of God’s master plan through Jesus. His ascension is part of that. Jesus goes to be “seated ... at his (Father’s) right hand in the heavenly places” as we heard in the epistle (Ephesians 1:20). And we can see how Peter “got” it in his first letter when he wrote “Jesus has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.” Jesus is boss. He is Lord.

No wonder the apostles worshipped him (Luke 24:52). The friend with whom they had slept under the stars is the person they now worship as the stars Creator.

And the third reason for their joy is, I think, that Jesus has commissioned them to be part of God's master plan for the kingdom of God. What an exciting prospect that is for them!

They are to be the official witnesses to Jesus's death and resurrection and proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. There is no other plan for the kingdom. The message is no longer in the hands of angels and Old Testament prophets. The plan of redemption that has been so meticulously planned and executed is now dependent for its ultimate success on Jesus's disciples, whom he has appointed apostles (and the word means messengers.)

That could be so daunting, commissioned as they are first to witness in Jerusalem where they are now, then in Judea, a little wider but still familiar, then out to Samaria, a bit "other" with different worship practices, and then on to the ends of the earth. But the apostles don't seem to be daunted at all! They are full of great joy! Why?

Well first, despite all their failings, they are being counted worthy to be entrusted with this final act in the master plan, its wide dissemination to many, many people. And second, they do not actually have to work up the strength, the muscle as it were, to succeed. They are actually told not to do anything until they "receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

They know about Holy Spirit. They know the prophecies of the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh – as we see when Peter quotes Joel on the day of Pentecost - and the flesh on which it is to be poured out is them!

They have seen Holy Spirit at work in Jesus, teaching, telling parables, having pertinent conversations, drawing people in, healing, confronting demons and even raising the dead. And they have experienced it themselves when they were equipped for the missions on which Jesus sent them. "The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" (Luke 10:17)

So maybe, even as Jesus departs, they are anticipating the same joy in fulfilling their new mission in the power of Holy Spirit.

So the angels' question "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?!" is very relevant. "Why are you looking up? Look out! You have a mission to fulfil."

Of course, the mission did not end when the last apostle died. The commission is for the church, us, his 21st Century apostles, we who are the body of Christ, in whom the fullness of Christ dwells (Ephesians 1:23).

As Luke recognised, the Ascension is a watershed in Jesus's ministry. It transitions from Jesus on earth ministering and proclaiming the kingdom of God in the power of Holy Spirit to Jesus, in the shape of the apostles, the body of Christ, ministering and proclaiming the kingdom of God in the power of Holy Spirit.

So our mission, should we choose to accept it – and we can refuse – is to minister and proclaim the kingdom of God in the power of Holy Spirit. Do we want to accept? Is the mission actually a priority for us?

But then what do we know, we in St Mungo and Penicuik, what do we experience, of Holy Spirit power? We speak and preach very little of it yet it should be a priority if we are to fulfil our mission. How can we rectify that? What can we do, or pray, to help one another? Do we want to?

Because, while the Ascension is a watershed in Jesus's ministry it is partly because it initiates the outpouring of Holy Spirit, which we will celebrate on Sunday week. May that be a day for us, as it was for the apostles, of fresh empowerment and impetus to mission.

Amen

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