

Sermon for Sunday May24th Sunday after Ascension Day.

Readings as set for Ascension Day;

Acts 1:1-11, and Luke 24: 44-53.

How are you at managing goodbyes? During this time of lockdown and social distancing, goodbyes have become very painful. My heart goes out to all those bereaved families who haven't felt that they were able to say a proper goodbye to their loved ones. That must be so painful. Personally, I am terrible with any goodbyes, I tell myself that over the years I've learned to mask it, but then I'm faced with another farewell and I'm left like a total mess. If the truth be told, the older I get the more emotionally labile I am becoming.

I remember hearing a story once about a Baptist minister from Bradford. It was back in 1762, and his name was Revd. John Fawcett. After a very happy and successful ministry here, he was invited to move with his family to a Church in London. To help with his farewell service, he penned that now well-known hymn; "Blest be the ties that bind". He packed all his worldly goods onto a wagon, and then...his farewell service was so emotional that he changed his mind...and remained in Bradford for the rest of his ministry.

When you then read the account for the final goodbyes of Jesus to His disciples, you might be surprised to discover that rather than t being sad, it appears to be a very joyous occasion. The fears and doubts of Easter are gone and instead we read that the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy, continually attending the temple and praising God.

Of course, these two accounts of the event known as the Ascension, both told for us by Luke are obviously written a long time after the event, with the spirit of hindsight, but there are several different things going on. Firstly, we have an account of the closing chapters of Jesus earthly life, bringing it neatly to an end, and the other account feels like a new beginning, opening for us the story of what happened when the Holy Spirit took over. It is known as the Acts of the Apostles, although perhaps it could more accurately be described as the acts of the Holy Spirit, or the beginnings of the disciple's relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Then there is all this "going up into the sky" business – back in the day people thought in terms of Up and Down, to express a move from one realm into another. As one of a generation who grew up with Dr Who on the TV, and being one of the least scientific people around, I have become very comfortable with the idea of operating in multi-dimensions, but we need to be very clear, Luke is not describing an event like a rocket launch! In Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus,(Chapter 4) he explains that Jesus first descended into hell and destroyed any power that Hell might have in holding people captive, and the He (Jesus) moved into Heaven to take his rightful place on the Throne of honour and glory.

The Ascension rightly brings all the passion narrative to a close. The resurrection and the ascension belong together, you cannot have one without the other. Without the ascension we might believe that Jesus was raised to life by God, but we would have no firm hope for ourselves and no knowledge of what ultimately happened to Jesus. It is the grand finale of the Incarnation, the word made flesh, dwelt among us and is now taken back into Heaven, opening the door to us, that we too might enter the eternal kingdom. Wow! That is worth reading again...

Have you noticed as well, how Luke's gospel story has perfect symmetry? Jesus takes his followers to Bethany, back to that special place for Jesus, where he has enjoyed the hospitality of Mary and Martha, where He raised Lazarus, and it is here that He now blesses them all, and withdraws into Heaven. The story by Luke begins with blessings and joy and ends in the same way. It begins with Heaven opening and the Divine coming to earth, and it ends with the Heavens opening to receive Him back.

By the time Luke is then writing his Acts of the Apostles to Theophilus, he has slightly altered his emphasis. No longer is Jesus the principle focus, now it is about his disciples, the ones who bore witness to Him and His promise of the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

So today is about endings and beginnings, if we learn anything in life it's that we can't have one without the other, it's a universal truth and Luke's two separate accounts set this out clearly, We are invited to be witnesses to the wonderful work of God, acting on behalf of the world's poor who depend on us to campaign for their release from oppression, and recovery of sight. It provides us with a challenge to look again at what being witnesses means, working for the good of the many not the few. We are never expected to do this under our own power, because this challenge comes with the promise of more, coming to us in Pentecost next week, when we discover the power and authority of the Holy Spirit. So thanks be to God for ends and beginnings, for this Ascension, and for the promise of what comes next.

*Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Jesu's love;  
The fellowship of Christian minds  
Is like to that above.*

*When for a while we part,  
One thought shall not be vain,  
That we shall still be joined in heart,  
Until we meet again.*

*When from all toil and pain  
And sin we shall be free,  
And perfect love and friendship reign  
Through all eternity.*      *John Fawcett (1740 – 1817)*